

Neighbourhood Renewal in Victoria: Transforming Places, Empowering People

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Abstract

While many Australians have enjoyed the benefits of growing prosperity, poverty has continued to concentrate in particular neighbourhoods. In the hardest hit communities, disadvantage manifests in high levels of unemployment, crime and social stigma, poor health status and low educational achievement. The cumulative effect of these factors is the exclusion of many people from mainstream social, economic and political life.

In Victoria, the state government's Neighbourhood Renewal initiative is reversing the decline of disadvantaged communities and reengaging residents in community, a productive economy and government. Fifteen renewal projects across Victoria are governed by local partnerships consisting of 50 per cent residents and leaders from government, the community sector and local businesses.

Residents are engaged in identifying priority local issues, strategic planning and decision-making about services and social investment. Early evaluation results demonstrate the combination of community governance and joined-up government is giving people a real say in the transformation of disadvantaged neighbourhoods into revitalised communities.

Introduction: The case for renewal

As the economy has grown over the last decade or so, many Victorians have benefited with improved income levels and new job and housing opportunities. However, not all communities have benefited equally. As the recent Jesuit Social Services report *Community Adversity and Resilience* shows, poverty continues to concentrate in particular neighbourhoods (Vinson 2004). Many of the hardest hit are in areas with high levels of public housing. Inequality in these neighbourhoods manifests in multiple factors such as poor employment opportunities, inadequate access to transport and other support services, widespread health problems, family breakdown, lower educational achievement, increasing use of drugs and associated crime and social stigma. The cumulative effects of these factors result in the exclusion of many people from the mainstream of social, economic and political life.

There have been attempts to tackle some of these problems in the past. But most initiatives have failed to deliver lasting change. Too much emphasis was placed on physical regeneration and not enough on the people that live in disadvantaged areas. Similarly, approaches that relied on single program-based provision of health and welfare services and approaches that were piecemeal, short-term, disconnected from local economies and local communities, produced little permanent change.

A major obstacle to improving social conditions in disadvantaged communities is the limited ability of individual government departments and programs with responsibility for narrowly defined and separate portfolios, such as health, education, transport and housing, to deal with the interdependence of the causes of disadvantage and exclusion. Operating alone, government programs tend to focus on specific issues in isolation from each other. The police deal with crime, schools with truancy, health services with illness. As many commentators have observed, the fragmented service system that results simply doesn't match up with the real needs of communities (Stuart-Weeks 1998; Adams and Hess 2001).

This paper introduces Neighbourhood Renewal as a social alternative that is more effectively tackling the complex problem of locational disadvantage in Victoria. The paper demonstrates some of the early achievements of Neighbourhood Renewal, assesses the reasons for its success, and presents future directions and challenges for government in reversing the trend to greater inequality and social exclusion.

What is Neighbourhood Renewal?

After successful trials in the Latrobe Valley and Wendouree West in Ballarat in 2001, Neighbourhood Renewal was launched in 2002 to narrow the gap between the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria and the rest of the state. Led by the Housing and Community Building Division in the Department of Human Services, Neighbourhood Renewal combines community strengthening, place-management, and joined-up government with a social investment strategy to achieve the Growing Victoria Together objective of building more cohesive communities and reducing inequalities.

In contrast to orthodox public policy, Neighbourhood Renewal develops holistic and integrated responses to the complex problem of poverty and social exclusion. The initiative brings together the resources and ideas of residents, governments, local communities, businesses and community groups in a whole-of-government and inter-sectoral partnership (Office of Housing 2002).¹

Neighbourhood Renewal provides a better deal for disadvantaged communities because it directly tackles local sources of disadvantage — it doesn't just treat the symptoms. It works because it focuses government programs on people and the places they live, work and play. And most importantly, Neighbourhood Renewal empowers people to become part of the solution. Each Neighbourhood Renewal project in Victoria is implementing a six-point plan of action to:

- increase people's pride and participation in their community
- lift employment and learning opportunities and expand local economies
- enhance housing and the physical environment
- improve personal safety and reduce crime
- promote health and wellbeing
- increase access to services and improve government responsiveness.

¹ Neighbourhood Renewal in Victoria is significantly influenced by its namesake initiative in the UK and by the work of the UK Social Exclusion Unit.

Fifteen communities across Victoria have been selected for Neighbourhood Renewal because of their relative disadvantage. Project locations range from inner city housing estates in Collingwood and Fitzroy to outer suburban communities like Werribee and Broadmeadows, to regional locations like Colac, Shepparton and Long Gully in Bendigo. Over 80,000 people live in areas selected for Neighbourhood Renewal.²

How does Neighbourhood Renewal work?

At the state level, the Department of Human Services has established a Neighbourhood Renewal Branch to spearhead change and coordinate input across government to disadvantaged neighbourhoods. A whole-of-government approach in Neighbourhood Renewal means:

- better coordination between government portfolios
- targeting initiatives and prioritising existing resources and growth funding to Neighbourhood Renewal projects
- all of government supporting implementation of Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans
- all of government working with local communities through local Neighbourhood Renewal governance arrangements.

Government agencies that have made specific commitments to support Neighbourhood Renewal include:

- Department of Education and Training
- Departments of Human Services
- Department of Infrastructure
- Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development
- Department of Justice, including Victoria Police
- Department of Sustainability and Environment
- Department for Victorian Communities.

Other key partners at a state level include the Sustainable Energy Authority of Victoria, VicHealth and VicUrban. Progress on 'joined-up' government, is monitored at an inter-departmental secretary level by the State Coordination and Management Council.

At a local level, strategic partnerships have been formed between regional offices of state government departments, local governments, local businesses, residents, community groups and service providers. Projects are auspiced by regional offices of the Department of Human Services and a Whole-of-Government Coordination Group in each region brings together Regional Directors of government departments to coordinate local investment.

² For details about each project location see <<http://www.neighbourhoodrenewal.vic.gov.au>>.

To make things happen on the ground, projects typically employ a project or place manager, project staff, community development worker and employment and learning coordinators. Rather than managing a specific government program or service, Neighbourhood Renewal staff are responsible for achieving cross-cutting outcomes for their neighbourhood. They bring together government programs and services so they make sense 'on the ground' and respond to local priorities.

What has been achieved?

In a recent ministerial statement to the legislative council (15 September 2004), titled 'The Bracks Government: Building Stronger Communities and a Fairer Victoria', the Hon. Candy Broad, MLC, Minister for Housing, summarised progress in Neighbourhood Renewal. The minister noted that jobs have been created, houses renovated and streets made safer. Access to health services and social support has improved. Government is responding better to community priorities. And most importantly, local residents are getting involved and leading change that is creating stronger and more vibrant local communities.

Success in achieving the six key objectives of Neighbourhood Renewal has been measured against a series of progress indicators combining administrative data such as unemployment rates and school attendance figures with community surveys assessing resident perceptions on key local issues.³ The results presented in this paper draw on the Ministerial Statement on Neighbourhood Renewal and summarise interim evaluation results that have not been previously published.

1. *Pride and participation*

Neighbourhood Renewal is building the capacity of individuals as decision-making citizens. Community strengthening activities are being linked with social investment, connecting strategies for engagement with practical initiatives to revitalise disadvantaged localities. In the partnership that results, residents have a stronger role in influencing local investment and service provision. Formally this is achieved by local governance arrangements, which require the inclusion of 50 per cent local residents, as well as representatives from government and other stakeholders. These arrangements empower residents to participate in planning, decision-making about priorities for action, implementing change with the support of government and evaluating the success of local initiatives.

The outcome is not a sanitised and conflict free partnership. Elevating issues experienced by disadvantaged communities introduces conflict, heterogeneity and unpredictability into decision-making processes and challenges government and its agencies to be less rigid and more adaptive. In beginning to devolve more power to communities, Neighbourhood Renewal is contributing to what Adams and Hess have described as 'new forms of organising democracy which realign relations between government, markets and communities' (Adams and Hess 2003, pp. 20, 22).

³ The community survey was developed by Swinburne University drawing on its extensive work in this field and international best practice. The actual surveys were conducted by various local academic institutions, which have formed partnerships with Neighbourhood Renewal projects across Victoria.

Residents are also celebrating their community through neighbourhood barbecues, arts and cultural projects, festivals, community gardening and family fun days. Community surveys conducted in Neighbourhood Renewal locations across Victoria show real improvement in civic culture. In Wendouree West for example, residents identified a 24 per cent net improvement in community pride during the first 12 months of renewal (Salvaris 2003).

2. Housing and the environment

To revitalise disadvantaged neighbourhoods, more than \$108 million has been allocated over two years (since 2002–03) by the Office of Housing in the Department of Human Services for Neighbourhood Renewal. A further \$45 million has been allocated for 2004–05. The result is more than 2500 public housing properties upgraded or improved. One hundred and thirty new properties have been built. These are changes that are making a crucial difference to people's lives — improving the liveability of their homes and pride in the place they live.

The value of this investment is demonstrated by interim evaluation results. Across all Neighbourhood Renewal projects that have been surveyed, residents perceived a net improvement of 35 per cent in local housing conditions. These perceptions are reinforced by administrative data, which shows turnover of public housing stock has decreased in over one-third of Neighbourhood Renewal areas. Ninety per cent of areas have had increases in the number of people who want to live in public housing in the area. And median house prices have increased in 70 per cent of Neighbourhood Renewal locations.

The improvement is the result of a partnership with many stakeholders. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Victoria has invested \$850,000 to make 1000 energy improvements to low-income houses in Neighbourhood Renewal areas, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, saving residents approximately \$100 a year on energy bills and employing and training local residents.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment is providing urban design assessments for Neighbourhood Renewal areas, supporting the redevelopment of local housing, streets, parks and shopping areas. Places that were scarred by graffiti, vandalism and used syringes have been transformed from derelict 'no-go zones' into vital public spaces.

3. Employment, learning and enterprise

When Neighbourhood Renewal was launched in 2002, research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Primary Care showed people living in the areas selected for the initiative were at least 83 per cent more likely to be unemployment benefit recipients and 45 per cent more likely to be health care cardholders than the state average. Sixty-three per cent more people were on a disability pension and there were 148 per cent more one-parent families.

Neighbourhood Renewal is breaking the cycle of welfare dependence in these communities by improving access to quality education, jobs training, skill development and supporting growth of

existing businesses and new enterprises. The Department for Victorian Communities' Community Jobs Program has invested \$5 million over the past two years. Unemployed local residents have been provided with work skills and employed to renew their community. Over 1000 community job places have been created, including positions in construction, landscaping, information technology, hospitality and childcare. Sixty per cent of graduates of the program are going into further employment or training.

The Department of Human Services is spending \$3.9 million over four years to fund 13 local employment and learning coordinators in Neighbourhood Renewal communities. The coordinators are supporting residents — many of whom are from families that have experienced intergenerational unemployment — access relevant employment programs and services. For example, in the Collingwood and Fitzroy projects, where the employment and learning coordinator position is auspiced by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, over 100 residents have been supported into employment in the past 12 months.

To help sustain employment outcomes, local community-based enterprises have been created in horticulture, recycling, construction and hospitality, providing ongoing work for residents. Another important initiative to sustain employment outcomes in Neighbourhood Renewal areas is a mandatory public tenant employment clause that requires commercial cleaning and gardening contractors to employ over one-third of local residents as part of their workforce. Where the clause has been successfully trialled and evaluated in Collingwood and Fitzroy, over 50 per cent of jobs associated with the contract have gone to residents who have received Certificate III training as part of their employment conditions.

To further provide incentives for people to move into the job market, a 16-week Office of Housing rent freeze is provided to public housing tenants when they get a job. The sum of these initiatives is having a positive impact. For example, in Fitzroy the community survey showed that residents perceived a 34 per cent net improvement in local training and education opportunities in the past 12 months.

Another important key to improving employment outcomes and civic engagement is access to quality education. In 2002, rates of students in Neighbourhood Renewal areas completing year 12 were 53 per cent lower than the rest of the state. Areas selected for renewal experienced higher than average levels of student absences, low level core skills in numeracy and literacy and low levels of student achievement in VCE and secondary colleges.

To reverse this trend, Neighbourhood Renewal is engaging local schools with the broader community to find local solutions. There are already positive developments. For example, in the Corio-Norlane project area, the Department of Education has funded a parent access facility in the Corio Bay Secondary College. The facility is providing support and family day care to young mothers so they can stay at school or return to studies while raising their children. In the Glendonald School in the Latrobe

Valley, the local principal attributes a 40 per cent reduction in absenteeism to the strong involvement of the community generated by Neighbourhood Renewal.

4. Crime and safety

Improved employment opportunities and rejuvenated local economies cannot be sustained where there are high levels of crime or people fear for their safety. At their inception, Neighbourhood Renewal areas were characterised by an average 58 per cent higher crime rate and 129 per cent higher rate of child protection notification than the state average. In Collingwood, the crime rate was 502 per cent above the state average.

To turn these statistics around, projects are combining crime prevention initiatives, local priority policing and community building. Victoria Police have allocated a senior officer to each renewal area and built the commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal into their business planning processes. The Department of Justice has funded the installation of security sensor lights in some areas. And Crime Prevention Victoria is providing training in Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design.

Early results show 60 per cent of Neighbourhood Renewal areas have experienced a decrease in property crimes. Crimes against persons have decreased in 90 per cent of Neighbourhood Renewal locations. In crime 'hot spots', significant progress has been made. In Collingwood and Fitzroy, Victoria Police is working closely with Neighbourhood Renewal projects to implement major safety plans and increase police presence. The Department of Human Services is spending over \$10 million to install concierge security systems and employ resident guardians to create a greater feeling of safety for people entering and leaving high-rise buildings.

As a result of these initiatives, the number of security incidents recorded in Fitzroy and Collingwood Neighbourhood Renewal areas have drastically reduced. For example, drug use incidents in Atherton Gardens fell from 250 in December 2001 to 30 in December of 2003. Vandalism and wilful damage fell from 22 incidents in December 2000 to only five in December 2003 and loitering from 139 incidents to five in the same periods.

In Glendonald Estate, Churchill — part of the Latrobe Valley Neighbourhood Renewal project — there has been a 41 per cent reduction in crime in the last year. In recognition of its innovative approach to crime prevention, the Latrobe Valley project received the Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Award Prize and Certificate of Merit in 2003.

5. Health and wellbeing

Another focal point for activity in Neighbourhood Renewal areas is improving health and wellbeing. The overall improvement in the health of Australians over the past decade has concealed a widening gap between the health of the rich and the poor. The Victorian Burden of Disease study shows a

strong correlation between high burden of disease, low socio-economic status and disadvantaged neighbourhoods.⁴

There is now overwhelming evidence about the principal causes of health inequality. According to the World Health Organisation's *Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts*, improving population health involves: "reducing levels of educational failure, reducing insecurity and unemployment and improving housing standards." The report goes on to note that "Societies that enable all citizens to play a full and useful role in the social, economic and cultural life of their society will be healthier than those where people face insecurity, exclusion and deprivation" (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003, p. 11).

These are exactly the things Neighbourhood Renewal is doing. And this is the reason the Hon. Bronwyn Pike, MP, Minister for Health, commented in her keynote speech to the 'Communities in Control' Conference in Melbourne 2003, that "By comprehensively tackling the root causes of ill health — and by emphasising community building — Neighbourhood Renewal is in a strong position to begin to turn around health inequalities in the most disadvantaged communities" (Pike 2003).

In addition to the social initiatives discussed in this paper, there are many health services provided in Neighbourhood Renewal areas that are improving health and wellbeing. For example, Community Health Centres are providing better access to primary health services and targeting health promotion activities to local issues. Health impact assessments are being trialled in Doveton-Eumemmering and Collingwood. And crucial dental services are being targeted to those most in need in Neighbourhood Renewal areas.

6. Government responsiveness

To improve the responsiveness of government to the needs of disadvantaged communities, government programs and agencies are working with local communities through Neighbourhood Renewal governance and planning arrangements. Each project is developing Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans that define how their communities will be revitalised. As a result of local planning and resident participation at Parkside Estate in Shepparton, for example, a \$13 million major redevelopment is proceeding in partnership with the urban and regional land corporation, VicUrban. In Parkside, the aspirations of local people are being realised in a revitalised urban landscape with a more balanced mix of public and private housing.

Cynicism about government is breaking down as residents views are translated into practical and visible improvements in their community. In an article on recent community development projects in Victoria, Nichols and Wiseman interviewed a number of residents from the Wendouree West Neighbourhood Renewal project in Ballarat. Faye Macintosh, who has been a resident in the neighbourhood since the 1960s, said she saw a genuine difference between the usual methods of community consultation and the Neighbourhood Renewal approach: 'We weren't told, we were

⁴ <<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/phd/bod/index.htm>>.

listened to — we were asked what we thought, what we felt.” (Nichols and Wiseman 2003, p. 24). Community surveys across Neighbourhood Renewal locations indicate residents perceived a significant improvement in the performance of government over 12 months. For example, in a once neglected housing estate in Fitzroy, residents perceived a 38 per cent net improvement in government performance.

Neighbourhood Renewal provides a new model to coordinate government programs so they make sense to the people they serve. It has created partnerships with local governments, the community sector, local businesses and citizens that are more democratic, respectful and efficient than traditional forms of public administration. The Hon. Candy Broad, MLC, Minister for Local Government and Minister for Housing, noted in *The Victorian Government Agenda for Building Stronger Communities*, Neighbourhood Renewal is “not just another program. It is not just an add-on. It is a fundamental shift in the way Government does business” (Broad 2003).

Lessons for government and future directions

In the recent Department for Victorian Communities’ ‘Government and Society Seminar’, Adjunct Professor Hayden Raysmith assessed the achievements of Neighbourhood Renewal and the lessons government could draw from this experience. Raysmith emphasised six key elements of success:

- A clear policy framework, objectives and method of evaluation established from the outset of the initiative
- Achievement of a strong mandate, leadership and support — politically, bureaucratically and from the community sector and residents
- Establishment of place-management teams with a geographic focus working on a manageable scale
- Emphasis on community participation in planning and governance connected to social investment and service delivery outcomes
- Multi-level negotiations and agreements between government departments and with relevant Ministers
- Structures and processes that address the intersection of top-down and bottom-up decision-making and the nexus between horizontal and vertical integration.

To sustain and strengthen achievements, in 2004 and beyond Neighbourhood Renewal will be more formally integrated or ‘mainstreamed’ into the core business practice and reporting requirements of all participating state government departments in Victoria. Ongoing place management arrangements will be implemented in all locations selected for Neighbourhood Renewal in Victoria via a number of mechanisms including:

- development of targets for each department in Neighbourhood Renewal areas
- specified roles for relevant parts of government in implementing Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans
- a stronger role for local government in creating sustainable local governance and area planning

- establishment of consistent regional whole-of-government structures with discretionary powers for coordinating government activity between departments at a regional and local level
- implementation of more flexible funding arrangements to better respond to locally identified priority issues
- a stronger role for the State Coordination and Management Council in monitoring departmental input to Neighbourhood Renewal.

Conclusion

Although many of causes of poverty and disadvantage derive from global and national forces that are beyond the influence of local place-based projects, Neighbourhood Renewal has demonstrated that there are important actions that state and local governments, community groups, local businesses and residents can take to resist the trend towards greater inequality and social exclusion.

The central learning from Neighbourhood Renewal is that it is possible to re-engage communities that are excluded from the political and social mainstream — if government listens, then acts, collaboratively and quickly. It is possible to reverse decline in disadvantaged neighbourhoods if government investment connects with the aspirations and builds the capacity of communities. By empowering local communities and better harnessing and coordinating local and regional resources, Neighbourhood Renewal has taken an important step towards creating more inclusive and healthy communities.

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