Planning for healthier growth

How can metropolitan strategic planning address social infrastructure gaps in middle and outer suburban Melbourne?

Summary report
January 2012
The Planning for Healthier Growth workshop was held on 14 November 2011 at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne (UoM), under the auspices of the university’s Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning and the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s Research and Policy Centre, and with the support of the Melbourne Engagement and Partnerships Office. These proceedings are aimed at informing and stimulating public discussion, debate and research and policy initiatives to address one of the central challenges facing contemporary Australian governments, industries and communities.

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Workshop presenters

Attendees were gathered from different faculties at the university and various industry and government agencies in Melbourne. The following papers were presented at the workshop (in order of presentation):

Associate Professor Carolyn Whitzman (Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, UoM): What is social infrastructure? Why is it important to equity and health?

Mr Andrew McDougall (SGS Economics & Planning): Social infrastructure gaps in outer suburban growth areas

Ms Denise Francisco (Department of Planning and Community Development): Social infrastructure planning in middle suburb growth areas

Professor Paul Smyth (UoM and Brotherhood of St Laurence): A governance perspective on social infrastructure

Dr John Stone (Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, UoM, and Swinburne University): A public transport access perspective on social infrastructure

Ms Linda Bulner (Delfin Lend Lease): A development perspective on social infrastructure

Associate Professor Elizabeth Ozanne (Melbourne School of Health Sciences, UoM): Social infrastructure for older people

Dr Jane Page (Melbourne Graduate School of Education, UoM): Social infrastructure for children

Dr Kate Shaw (Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, UoM) and Dr Maree Pardy (School of Social and Political Sciences, UoM): Place management and impact on social infrastructure

Mr Ian Woodcock (Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, UoM): Re-visioning communities

Ms Jessica Bird (VEIL [Victorian Eco-Innovation Lab], UoM): Sunshine studio

Mr Tony Nicholson (Brotherhood of St Laurence): Place-based governance: a federal policy perspective

Ms Cath Smith (Victorian Council of Social Service): A state policy agenda for social infrastructure

Ms Kelly Grigsby (Brimbank Council): Brimbank Council perspective

Professor Billie Giles-Corti (McCaughhey Centre, UoM): Towards a research agenda on social infrastructure
Introduction
The Planning for Healthier Growth workshop, co-hosted by University of Melbourne and the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s Research and Policy Centre, included six thematic sessions:

1. Identifying problems and opportunities: what is the current state of social infrastructure in middle and outer Melbourne suburbs?

2. Different perspectives on social infrastructure: how can these perspectives inform our understanding of social infrastructure?

3. Needs and assets: what are the key social infrastructure needs of particular population groups (children, youth, older people and new migrants)?

4. Place-based interventions: what can we learn from place-based intervention projects about improving social infrastructure?

5. Policy: how can policy interventions at federal and state levels help local communities?

6. Towards a research agenda on social infrastructure.

All of the speakers agreed that the current social infrastructure provision in outer suburban Melbourne is inadequate, and each highlighted the consequences in their field. The following sections summarise the presentations and round-table discussions in each of the sessions.

Identifying problems and opportunities: what is the current state of social infrastructure in middle and outer Melbourne suburbs?

Opening the discussion, Carolyn Whitzman defined the term ‘social infrastructure’ as the basic framework of services pertaining to the organisation of society/community. She identified the different kinds of social infrastructure, highlighting the need for providing it and the problems that may occur when social infrastructure is not provided. Andrew McDougall presented a cost–benefit analysis of the Sydney outer suburb of Campbelltown, to estimate the likely scale of costs and benefits of partially closing the gaps in jobs and services between urban growth areas and their host metropolis. After establishing the need for intervention, with only 27% jobs in growth areas compared to 43% jobs in capital cities, 39% of the population with Year 12 education in growth areas compared to 48% in capital cities, and higher housing stress in growth areas, he argued that the disadvantage of growth areas will worsen unless they are specifically targeted; that a fully integrated plan for better servicing growth areas is rare, reflecting the complex service delivery arrangements; that key to success is spatially coordinating capital and recurrent expenditures, and that while the cost of better servicing growth areas is high, it is likely to be outweighed by benefits (see McDougall & Maharaj 2011, p. 139). Concluding the session, Denise Francisco provided a good example of planning for social infrastructure in the Footscray Central Activities Area 2010–2020 Plan. Some of the challenges facing this middle suburb are rapid population growth, limited land availability, lack of open space and inadequate facilities to cater for growth. The plan includes a civic and community hub, spaces for health and wellbeing services, an integrated early-years hub and open spaces.

All attendees agreed that the rapid growth in new suburbs creates gaps between existing social infrastructure and community needs, and that current infrastructure planning is too slow to fill that gap. Moreover, social infrastructure is needed also in the middle suburbs, as is the case in
Footscray and Brimbank. The need to plan social infrastructure at an early stage was highlighted, so that there is appropriate space for services (e.g. Centrelink, youth services, retirement services) to be set up once residents move in. The understanding that different communities have different social infrastructure needs was emphasised, as well as the need for social infrastructure to meet the changing needs of the community.

Attendees also agreed that providing social infrastructure enhances good social relations among residents. In particular, public transport and education were identified as critical, keeping people connected and getting young people to jobs. The importance of providing them early was highlighted as this can prevent disengagement of different groups. For example, teenagers would otherwise go to high schools outside the community and would not feel part of it.

**Different perspectives on social infrastructure: how can these perspectives inform our understanding of social infrastructure?**

This session opened with Paul Smyth who provided a governance perspective. He discussed social policy relating to people and place, arguing that in the past two decades there has been a backlash against social planning, with notions such as the ‘competitive city’, market-driven economy and gentrification leading to further increase in polarisation in Australian society. He compared past thinking with the current thinking around planning for a just city (Fainstein 2010) and diversity in the city (Fincher & Iveson 2008), and argued that these approaches are not linked well to the wider bundle of social services. Smyth pointed to the role of NGOs today, stressing that NGOs are important in making rights real at the interface of universal services and local communities; gaining trust of groups who do not otherwise engage in the community; innovating to address services gaps; giving space for groups to articulate aspirations; and creating space for volunteer engagement. John Stone presented a transport perspective, arguing that it would be possible to have adequate public transport in outer suburbs if we adopted best practice planning learned from international examples. He argued, however, that change can happen only if there is a well-organised popular opposition to existing transport policies and there are new politicians and new leaders in key transport policy institutions. The session concluded with a developer’s perspective, presented by Linda Bulner, reflecting on the development of Caroline Springs by Lend Lease (formerly Delfin). She argued that ‘business as usual’ is not enough and that as a development company they continue to challenge their team to innovate and create socially prosperous communities with a clear sense of belonging.

Referring to the governance perspective, some attendees argued that the Victorian government needs to play a stronger role in overseeing new developments and keeping with the principles and the implementation of policies such as Melbourne 2030 and Melbourne @ 5 million, for example providing adequate housing and containing the Urban Growth Boundary. They also noted that federal leadership is needed to provide a coordinated response to the need for social infrastructure. Others maintained that government needs to provide greater long-term commitment, that is, looking beyond the political cycle. Some attendees argued that there seems to be no political will for a coherent strategy. The need for better relationships and connections between state and local government was also emphasised.

Other suggested that public–private partnerships need to have both financial and public dimensions. Docklands was given as a bad example, where there was no plan and the undertaking was influenced by developers, money, the economy and neo-liberal governance. It was argued that the City of Melbourne now has more involvement in Docklands, with provision of a library and
other community facilities; however they have a difficult job dealing with the spaces that have been left after the development.

With regard to public transport, there was consensus that public transport is largely absent in outer suburbs and when it exists it is poorly timetabled and is not interconnected. Attendees argued that it is the role of the planning system, not the property developer, to advocate for transport. If more roads are built and less public transport is planned, people in these developments will continue to drive. Instead, government should stop building roads and start investing in cycling and walking paths. Public transport costs one-quarter as much as freeways. It was agreed that there needs to be a greater advocacy around how public transport assists health and community well-being, and that public transport provision needs to be debated publicly.

One problem identified was a stigma associated with the use of public transport in Melbourne (and generally in Australia) compared with Asian countries such as Hong Kong. Other deterrents for some groups to using public transport include the high cost which leads to fare evasion; uncertainty about transport regulation; and concern about women’s and children’s safety.

Regarding the developer’s perspective, it was agreed that the property developer should allocate land at the beginning, not after development, so social infrastructure is in place before people move in. Attendees suggested that the market research of developers could be used to inform needs. Also, it was noted that once an estate is built and the developer hands over the management of the building and services it is often very difficult for councils to handle the costs. For example, Lend Lease moving now out of Caroline Springs causes concern as there are unresolved issues around maintaining community infrastructure. There needs to be a transitional model of handing over the management of services.

Also discussed was urban infill in middle-ring suburbs, compared with inner-city infill or greenfield development. Attendees argued that there is little strong policy which drives urban redevelopment, while there is much better support for development on the fringe. Greenfield development is much easier than infill in terms of regulation, and because there is no commercial incentive in many suburbs (and intense resident opposition), infill has been neglected so far. Middle-ring suburbs do not offer the same scale or interest for developers as outer suburbs, nor the density of inner-ring suburbs to drive successful community development. It was also argued that larger developers like Lend Lease have the ability to better develop social planning and infrastructure. There are easier returns on larger developments and less pressure from stakeholders, while for smaller developments it is harder to integrate social infrastructure.

Another aspect is timing—the stage at which social infrastructure is built into development. It was agreed that social infrastructure needs to be built into initial development and that developers should only be allowed to build in growth areas if they provide the required infrastructure, because adding it afterwards is more expensive. Also, in this way developers would bear the true cost of development. Some cities such as London and Wellington protect their green belts as if sacrosanct, and attendees suggested that if Melbourne had this attitude it would change the face of urban development; however, the lack of political will means this will not happen. The property developers would adapt, as they are very creative, but for as long as it is still easier to make money from greenfield development they will continue to do so. Lend Lease have explored smaller boutique brownfield regeneration projects such as Edgewater in Footscray, but developers (and investors) prefer certainty.
The issue of affordable housing was also discussed. One workshop group felt that affordable housing is the most important issue to start with when thinking about planning for healthier growth. For example, there needs to be a good mix of housing for different ages and with a range of bedrooms. However, some areas (e.g. Whittlesea) have three-bedroom apartments that developers cannot sell because most people who move to outer suburbs want the big block and house. One solution suggested was an ongoing public dialogue about the preoccupation with housing prices, as opposed to affordable living (encompassing transport costs). As social isolation may affect smaller or single-person households, it was suggested that there is a need for shared housing to enable more social interaction. It was argued that one of the problems is that three levels of government in Victoria work separately from one another to solve housing affordability problems.

**Needs and assets: what are the key social infrastructure needs of particular population groups?**

The session opened with a presentation by Elizabeth Ozanne discussing social infrastructure for older people. She emphasised the need for planning for older people because the population is ageing rapidly. In Australia, people aged 65 or more represent 13.2% of the population and by 2035 there will be twice as many people above the age of 80. This older population comes from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and has a wide range of family arrangements, physical abilities, health circumstances and service needs. Ozanne presented a research project titled ‘Active ageing in place in the growth corridors in the North West Metropolitan Region’, in which the researchers will guide six new project officers, initiate a relevant regional program, and pilot a new intensive short course. Jane Page then presented the need for social infrastructure for children, and especially the need for high-quality early education which mitigates the expense of remedial action in primary and secondary schools and results in subsequent adult productivity. She also emphasised that inadequate social infrastructure for children, together with fragmentation of services and lack of a holistic view of children’s development, can have negative impacts on children’s health, wellbeing, development, learning, agency and rights. It can also increase social inequalities for children and families and lead to their dislocation.

This session included group discussions focused on different population (age or cultural) groups. In the following sections, discussions are presented under these themes.

**Children (0–12 years)**

Five issues were raised in this group discussion. The first was children’s participatory rights and the need for children to be involved in the planning process. Examples are the Child Friendly City and the Atherton Gardens community hub which is involving children in planning. Attendees agreed that it is important to think about how to engage children in these discussions. In Copenhagen, for example, older children are given physical tools to create and to be constructive.

Attendees also supported Jane Page’s emphasis on the need for co-location of services, as well as proximity of related facilities. For example, a community garden can be located near a basketball court. In Tel Aviv, there is sports equipment for adults in the playground so parents can exercise while children play, where children are acting like adults and vice versa. This should be done in a way that respects each group’s values when bringing them together. Attendees emphasised that school-gate meetings are very important as this is where parents form the social capital that builds community.
A third issue discussed was the need to make spaces for children that are inclusive for all groups, so that, for example, grandparents can access the playgrounds. Children are very willing and mindful of including others and making sure the place is pleasurable for all users, and this enriches the experience.

Another issue was the need to encourage physical play. One of the growth area councils found that some children did not play, both because of their environment and the prevalence of technology. As a result, these children have been losing gross motor skills. It was claimed that competitive consumerism in the classroom distances children from nature and leads to decrease in imagination; however, with guidance children can move from wanting ‘material’ things to wanting experiences, such as places to play. A good example is the Bush Kinder at Westgarth for four and five-year-olds, which is working well now the children have developed a familiarity with the place and how it works. Wild spaces give children an ever-changing environment where there are no rules about how to play.

Finally, the issue of ‘living with risk’ was discussed. It was argued that fear about safety is a big concern among parents and an issue that should be included in policy. Children need to learn to calculate risks and if parents are not giving them these opportunities they will never learn.

Youths 12–25 years group

This discussion focused on several aspects of community engagement and young people. First, it was agreed that this group has varying needs in terms of both age and gender. Attendees agreed that there needs to be a community centre for young people, where they can be respected and have choice and autonomy with guidance. It was argued that the growth corridor areas’ biggest gap is for youths after school hours, which is even more important for young people who are leaving school because they need a place to gather. Also discussed was social networking which is a possible model for social integration, for example a virtual construct of the community hub, such as Second Life.

One possible way to foster engagement of young people is to start a dialogue between young people and business owners. A few attendees argued that shopping centres are important for older children who want a place to ‘hang out’ but shop owners often tell them to move on and youth are seen as loiterers. Thus there is a need to provide a social space for young people. Another problem raised is the lack of public transport and the fact that young people do not have a driver’s licence, so they are isolated and cannot get to work or socialise. For example, the last bus from Highpoint Shopping Centre on a Saturday night departs at 8:30 pm and there is no time for socialising not in the home. Limited public transport options, few other services and isolation have been identified as concerns for young people in Caroline Springs.

Older people

This table discussed four issues. Firstly, it was agreed that there is a shortage of data on older people. People aged over 65 are considered as one group and are rarely differentiated in the data available, even though the group is highly heterogeneous, and sub-groups are largely health-based. Attendees agreed with Ozanne on the lack of social indicators for older people and it was also said that there is no national picture of retirement villages in Australia. Attendees argued that there is a need to place aged-care facilities in areas that enable social connections between generations instead of simply building on the cheapest, largest blocks available. Ageing is often not included in social infrastructure provision plans; yet older people are also moving to growth areas so they can be close to their children and grandchildren.
Another issue was older people and poverty. Some people get to the age of 65 having never owned their home, for example older female ‘boomers’ who have little superannuation. Those who rent and have little income to support themselves are a population group of growing concern. It was argued that the gulf between rich and poor older people is growing and that some older people move to regional areas because they cannot afford housing in Melbourne.

The issue of the multi-generational family was also discussed. Whereas in the recent past the family was thought of as being two generations, now the family often comprises three, four or five generations. Of these, three are working, and this shift requires a change of thinking. More members of the sandwich generations are looking after their children and parents at the same time and thus there is a greater reliance on services. Planning instruments need to take this into account. There is also a need to look at digital methods of communicating with the older group and connecting different generations. In addition, it was argued that volunteering is under-resourced and there is a need for a national volunteering scheme.

Finally, the lack of services for older people was discussed. One attendee argued that there are areas in the North West region where there are many older residents and there is limited access to services and amenities. There is a need, it was agreed, to think not only about housing but also about older people’s connections to amenities and services.

Newly arrived migrants and refugees

This discussion focused on six issues. First, it was noted that even people from the same culture are not homogenous and have diverse needs, and that sometimes conflict occurs due to circumstances in their country of origin, even before settlement in Australia. Then the issue of settlement and place for newly arrived migrants was discussed. It was agreed that settlement support is very important, even more so than infrastructure. For example, refugees and migrants become disproportionately represented in the justice system several years after arrival, and this is partly a failure of settlement processes. Moreover, assistance for unaccompanied minors requires more support over a longer timeframe than is currently available and it should include daily living skills. Without adequate assistance, unaccompanied minors are more susceptible to homelessness and crime. Also, it was argued that the collective impact of newly arrived communities can often be perceived as a threat, for example African young people in a group being perceived as a gang.

An example of more effective settlement support is in Footscray, where people feel welcomed (including by the police) and there is good service delivery, so people come to Footscray even if they do not live there. However, attendees agreed that there has been a diminishing of services over the last 20 years in Melbourne and there is a need to combine services and provide a space where services are available together. Settlement support is happening in African hairdressers and rug shops because this is where community members feel comfortable and can get comprehensive information from their own people. This is particularly so if it is a small community so they can come together in one place. Attendees agreed that accidental social contacts such as hairdressers, Laundromats as well as health professionals, should be trained to deal with this function of their role as facilitators in society. Attendees argued that local governments need to provide more support by enabling communities and looking for opportunities, rather than looking at obstacles and risks.

Attendees agreed that comprehensive, in-depth service delivery is needed. One way of doing it, it was suggested, is by listening to people’s stories to understand their needs and the issues they are facing. Better planning and coordination are needed to integrate and link services. While some services are valuable in assisting newly arrived people, programmatic funding does not cover needs
over time. Especially, it was argued, long-term planning is needed, because community organisations cannot sustain small, low-funded programs. There is increased demand for services, but community organisations do not have the funding or the professional expertise to meet the complex needs of newly arrived migrants and refugees.

Another issue discussed was current social infrastructure and the cultural needs of the community which are overlooked. For example, houses are not big enough to suit multi-generational families and large families. Public housing often cannot accommodate families with more than four children. Racism in the private rental market is also a barrier to meeting needs, even if larger housing stock exists. The housing problem can be illustrated in Melton, where families are often in extreme mortgage or rental stress. After rent/mortgage payments, many families cannot afford food, bills and transport. This is particularly so for refugee families who buy a house with no deposit and then cannot afford anything else, including food. If there is family breakdown and some members move away, they lose their community support and the lack of public transport to Melton causes further isolation.

Attendees agreed that small community businesses and enterprises need support, particularly with affordable rent and smaller office spaces. Shared space agreements or community hubs would be useful. Some attendees argued that there is a lack of affordable and available facilities where communities feel welcome, and that there is an opportunity in sharing community facilities for intergenerational and intercultural mixing. Others argued, however, that there are policies for shared facilities but insurance and risk management block their use. In addition, culturally appropriate facilities are also required, for example swimming pools that can be sectioned off for Muslim women. A long-term and interdisciplinary approach (not just planning) is required to build inclusion. A counter example is the new development in Moondah, which lacks community services and facilities.

Lastly, the issue of engaging migrants in the community was discussed. It was argued that there are different levels of community interaction and connection and true inclusion is acknowledging and addressing this complexity. There is also a need to engage the ‘hard to reach’ groups that are not comfortable participating in consultations.

Place-based interventions: what can we learn from place-based intervention projects about improving social infrastructure?

This session opened with Kate Shaw and Maree Pardy presenting an investigation of urban renewal projects in Footscray and the City of Greater Dandenong, exploring the concept of placemaking. Ian Woodcock presented a project on transit-oriented urban design with six case studies, including railway stations, tertiary educational campuses and regional shopping malls. He presented different ways of intensifying these places through multi-scalar analysis and scenario building, urban design visions, architectural types, and the exploration of the barriers for change. Lastly, Jessica Bird presented the work of the VEIL studio, which has focused on the suburb of Sunshine and has included students engaging residents in the designing process for various public buildings and spaces.

Place-based interventions are a key anchor for public participation and the challenge for local involvement in growth areas is that the community is not there yet. Attendees explained that interventions are usually physical, and not social, and that interventions are usually one-off and
slow, and can therefore lose relevance. For example, in Acland Street (St Kilda) the participatory
design lost relevance over the three-year project, where the demographics changed substantially.

The VEIL Studio (Sunshine) was noted as a good example of taking design to the people rather
than relying on government. There can a conflict between infrastructure that is aesthetically
pleasing and what a community feels comfortable using; and if people cannot associate their
community with a space they will not use it. The term ‘ethno architecture’ was explained as
buildings that people can associate with culturally, for example through design and symbols.
However, it was argued that this can be difficult, for example fostering conflict between cultural
groups or exclusion of certain groups due to symbols; and that councils are avoiding celebrating
culture for this reason (risk aversion).

Attendees argued that social equity must play out in architecture and design, and spaces need to be
made accessible and inspiring. The need for developing design guidelines in relation to older
people’s needs, as well as children’s needs, was emphasised. Computer technology, for example
GIS and 3D modelling, should be used to research and map community needs.

A few attendees expressed their views that there needs to be more public consultations, and the
public needs to be treated as intelligent. Also, people’s opinions must be respected and community
groups need to feel valid and that their opinion has been heard. When this does not happen then
community groups become disillusioned and negative. On the other hand, it was claimed that
communities need to take responsibility for their situation. They need to harness their passion and
knowledge to do something positive. Seeing how far people can actually take on this type of
responsibility is an interesting exercise but is not necessarily straightforward. For example, the
St Kilda adventure playground has now been made ‘safe’ as the council have finally stepped back
in after the community managed it for many years on their own. Despite the fact that it had been
successfully managed, the council took over to make it a safer environment.

Such organised social places as playgrounds, attendees argued, are places that foster community
discussion. Another traditional place for community interaction was maternal and child health
centres. These were once placed in neighbourhood areas to ensure local mothers could access them
on foot, meet other local mothers, and develop local support systems. Now, there are ‘hubs’ that are
located so mothers have to drive to them and socialise with those who may not be neighbours, or
simply drive there and drive home and hardly speak to anyone at all.

A similar view was that small to medium-size private businesses are necessary for the vitality of
the growth areas. An example is Chadstone and Oakleigh, where in the past there was concern
about Oakleigh dying, yet the Greek middle class took it on and built it up. However, new areas
lack the local milk-bar where people get to know each other. It was suggested that cafes can be
built by developers very early and then become amazing places where people get together, either
on purpose or incidentally, and become involved in socialising, business and retail activity. A good
example is the ‘Day 1’ hubs at Laurimar which include a general store, cafe and other small
businesses all in the same place so people interact and develop networks as early as possible.

Forming communities was another issue discussed. First it was clarified that there is a difficulty in
defining ‘place’, as different places have different issues and needs over the long term. Also, the
definitions of ‘poor’ or ‘disadvantaged’ are not clear. Attendees argued that residents in some
places like Thomastown and Lalor would hate to see themselves referred to as poor or
disadvantaged. Often established immigrants like Italians become the group who having been
accepted find it hard to accept new communities like those from Africa. As discussed before, it was
suggested that schools, which are left empty during the evening and weekends, should be used by other community groups at these times to reduce infrastructure costs.

It was also argued that in new communities there is a tremendous potential for NIMBY (not in my backyard) groups to take on management roles and to block innovation. In contrast, community organisations can be encouraged to take on a positive role in society, and this is an opportunity to do so.

Attendees highlighted the value of strip shopping, where people know each other, as opposed to large new isolated shopping centres that are hard to walk to and designed to house cars. Because it is most profitable for big shopping centres to move in before development begins, it is most likely that there will be shopping centres and not shopping strips in new developments, at least in the first years of development. Thus there is a need to look at redesigning shopping centres so they do not look like enormous structures designed only for cars (e.g. Epping Plaza).

Policy: how can policy interventions at federal and state levels help local communities?

This session was opened by Tony Nicholson discussing a federal policy perspective on place-based governance. He presented work undertaken by the Australian Social Inclusion Board in 2010 on the governance of location-based approaches. The Board has investigated governance models that work best for locational approaches to address disadvantage, focusing on locations of 5000 inhabitants or less. It was found that disadvantage tends to concentrate in a relatively small number of places, and residents of the most disadvantaged locations are more likely to experience multiple disadvantages. It was also found by the Board that addressing location-based disadvantage requires a different approach as a traditional policy approach can create practical barriers. The Board argues that place-based approaches should be based on five key elements: 1) a clear connection between economic and social strategies; 2) a framework for providing integration of effort across government; 3) a level of devolution allowing meaningful local involvement in determining issues and solutions; 4) capacity development to allow community engagement and devolution of responsibility; and 5) funding, measurement and accountability mechanisms that support the long-term aims for the initiative. Cath Smith discussed a state policy agenda for social infrastructure in the context of housing affordability gaps leading to health inequalities. Kelly Grigsby presented the Brimbank Council perspective, situating Brimbank as the second most disadvantaged municipality in Greater Melbourne, and explaining how the council has re-positioned Brimbank at the forefront of the local government sector as a result of a significant transformational journey over the past two years. She presented various plans and programs dealing with town centres and sites and strategic planning and economic development. She also presented the council as a deliverer of projects and services in different areas such as Brimbank Community Leadership Programs, public arts projects and cultural events.

This session included discussions on different levels of government and their possible involvement in helping local communities. One issue discussed was the need for new paradigms of strategic visioning and political will. Attendees agreed with Tony Nicholson’s emphasis on the challenge of addressing complex problems. For complex problems, there is a need to look at the causes of the problems. It was also argued that the role of the federal government is murky when it comes to Growth Areas and that there is a need for coordinated strategic visioning at federal level. The old-fashioned view that the community itself needs to solve the problem is unrealistic when many of the causes lie outside the community. For example, the local government at Whittlesea
invites public participation but this involves only a very small proportion of the residents and community engagement platforms are often tokenistic.

Attendees agreed that there is a need for a well-organised population and new political leaders who can institute a new approach. This can be done by building local capacity to identify and address structural issues. A good example is the Leadership Development Program, where participants learn to apply for funding, plan and deliver a program.

Finally, funding was discussed. A few attendees noted that before the change of state government in 2010 there were promises made for funding of social infrastructure. In some cases, this funding has still not been distributed as promised (e.g. the Puffing Billy train). An example of funding cuts is the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning which affects the educational choices available to people, especially in the western suburbs. Other attendees maintained that it is better not to focus too much on funding, because there needs to be a focus also on local government forming partnerships as part of its organisational commitment and as part of its community plans and processes.

Towards a research agenda on social infrastructure

This session included the final presentation of Billie Giles-Corti. She summarised the five previous sessions and identified a number of issues and research questions arising from each presentation. Concluding the session, attendees brainstormed ideas to develop a research agenda for future research and partnerships between academia, government and industry. The key research ideas and questions are presented below, followed by research currently under way.

Key research questions and ideas

- What place management models are in place now? Which models work well and which do not? Are there any other options?
- What kind of infrastructure can help children, the elderly and other groups?
- How can physical infrastructure and social infrastructure be linked to decrease the inequalities in health?
- What obligations are placed on people receiving welfare?
- What is basic infrastructure? What are the resources communities need to flourish? Is there a threshold (quantity) and timeframe?
- Need to look at different basic indicator scenarios, particularly for Growth Areas.
- What is the role of virtual environments in supporting the community?
- Need to understand what ‘respect’ means in participatory groups (around language of disadvantage).
- Gap between research and legislation. There is a need to test the assumption that political will must be there and that research and legislative changes will follow as flow-on effects.
- Need to test integrated service delivery models.
- Need to explore the real ‘personality’ of Growth Area communities.
- What would happen if the government held on to the Urban Growth Boundaries? Will that lead to viability of inner and middle-ring suburban infill development?
- Need to explore models for affordable housing.
Current research

- The ‘Social Infrastructure Planning Tool’ is a project undertaken by the City of Whittlesea. It is a planning tool for growth areas, looking at the social infrastructure needs of new communities, particularly for soft infrastructure, and how these needs could be addressed. The project has three stages: current research and needs; examples and case studies of good practice; and development of a framework to guide future practice. The first stage has been completed. Different levels of government are involved, and it is hoped that this tool will assist in future funding provision.

References


