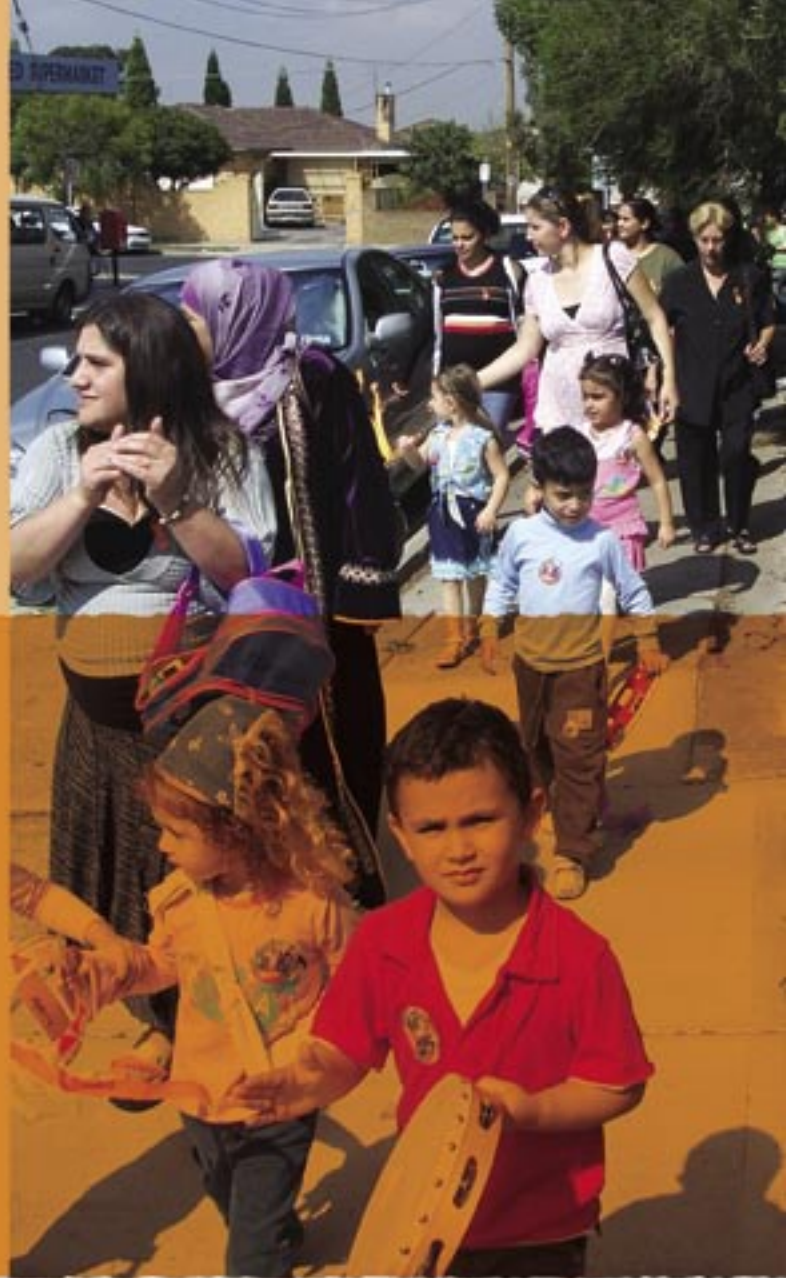


Setting the hubs humming

Working together for children and their families



Hubs Strategy Group for Hume Communities for Children Initiative



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Setting the hubs humming

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‘Coming together is a beginning, staying together
is progress, and working together is a success.’

Henry Ford

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Early Years services involved:

- Meadowbank Early Learning Centre
- Meadow Fair North Preschool (Hume City Council)
- Campbellfield Heights Preschool (Hume City Council)
- Meadowbank Primary School
- Campbellfield Heights Primary School
- Meadow Fair North Primary School
- Jacana Primary School
- Hume Global Learning Village
- VisyCare Learning Centre
- Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Supported Playgroups
- Jacana Juniors Playgroup
- Victorian Co-operative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG): Arabic-speaking Playgroup Campbellfield
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Hume City Council

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Introduction

Welcome!

Hubs, in the context of this report, represent linked practices, places and people and the roles each play in the integration of services for children and their families.

Early Years Hubs represent a shift in thinking and practice to the provision of services in increasingly inclusive ways. They act as a vehicle for joint planning of activities across sectors, enabling parents, children and community members to join together to plan, develop and be part of activities that are local, friendly, welcoming, non-judgemental and, most importantly, engaging. *Setting the hubs humming* has been created to document the experience of this work in the Hume Communities for Children site.

This document outlines the learnings, working definitions and advice gained from the experience of the communities in this project. Working and emerging definitions have been included to illustrate the different approaches and strategies that have been adopted across the sites and as a means of demonstrating the diverse opportunities for service integration. Evidence-based research and local insights are provided, which reinforce the strength of integrated approaches. Barriers and enabling opportunities are also important features that highlight progress through difficulties and celebrate the success of innovation. Professional practices and models of the development of community Hubs have also been detailed. These practices have grown over three years, supported by the goodwill and commitment of partnership agencies.

In addition this work has been created for anyone interested in exploring an integrated approach to the provision of services for children and their families. It has been developed to assist others in their own reflection, planning and implementing of similar projects and can be used as a tool and point of reference complementary to the action research process. It is by no means a definitive work, rather a beginning point from which other information may be sourced and further investigation undertaken. The style of the document has been chosen to be accessible to professionals, parents in leadership roles and the community so as to inspire a more collaborative approach to offering services that support children and their families.

The following people and organisations might find this report particularly insightful:

- professionals working with children and their families in early childhood services, maternal and child health centres, primary schools and community health services
- government at all levels
- community agencies which work with children and their families or in partnership endeavours to offer services to the broader community in a collaborative manner.

Evidence base

The evidence base for the development of community Hubs emerges from both local and international research and local practice experience. The concept of service integration, especially in the provision of service for children, has received much attention in recent years. Research undertaken across both the developed and developing world suggests that where services for children work together, the outcomes for families are significantly beneficial. The practical experience documented to date in the local communities of Hume, through Best Start, Neighbourhood Renewal and most recently Communities for Children, although embryonic, supports the need for a greater level of investment in this work. There is a significant opportunity for this community to add to the research evidence, particularly Australian-based, regarding the outcomes for children and their families, of an integrated response to service provision.

The research evidence available from this growing body of work confirms the benefits and positive outcomes of an integrated approach. It is a persuasive argument that encourages both governments and professionals to explore, with even more enthusiasm, the possibilities of this type of service, particularly in relation to service efficiency and increased beneficial outcomes for children. The work of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project and Head Start in the United States, and Sure Start in the United Kingdom is perhaps the most well known of studies involving forms of integrated children's services. The studies join many others, importantly an increasing number in Australia, in detailing the way in which these services have been developed and what outcomes we might expect to see. Of particular note are the projects and studies under way in Australia and internationally, measuring the impact of full service schools. The Commonwealth Government's own evaluation report into the Full Service School program, in 2001, found that:

There is general agreement and documented evidence that the Full Service Schools Program has had a significant impact on the educational opportunities of at risk young people and has demonstrated value for money. (Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, February 2001, p.2.)

Whilst this project concentrated on youth, the gains made here, as current Early Years research confirms, could be greater should the interventions occur earlier in life. Several key insights that can be found in some of the research mentioned previously, are worth noting.

- Families generally receive more comprehensive support from integrated service due to the 'one-stop-shop' nature of the centres. (Bruner 1991)
- Children are prevented from falling through the cracks of service provision especially if they experience multiple disadvantage and social exclusion. (Bruner 1991)
- Environmental risks that affect children, for example family violence and poverty, in a given neighbourhood or community reduce due to sustained interventions by integrated services. (Bruner 1991)

- Children are more likely to be and stay connected with integrated services throughout their early childhood and into further education. (Bertram et al. 2003)
- Parents are more likely to maintain connections with community services, for example schools and training organisations, beyond the experience of the integrated children's centre because of the diverse range of opportunities to participate and be supported and valued. (Carbone et al. 2004)
- Integrated children's services contribute significantly to children living in poverty especially in relation to 'their intellectual and social development in childhood and their school success, economic performance, and reduced commission of crime in adulthood'. (Schweinhart 2005, Shonkoff & Phillips 2000)
- *The Breaking Cycles Building Futures Report* (2004)
- The Brotherhood of St Laurence has developed an Inclusion Framework in the above report with four principles relevant to community Hub activity:
 - overcoming practical and structural barriers
 - building positive relationships
 - cultural sensitivity and value for effort
 - service coordination and linkages.
- International models of Hubs are described in the McCain and Mustard report, *The Early Years Study Three Years Later* (2002), which recommends integrated child and parenting centres offering a range of activities for families at one or a number of local sites with a common vision and outcome measures.

Poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, poor health and nutrition [etc] ... are the challenges hundreds of thousands of our youngsters and their families face every day. It is no wonder that children bring more than educational needs into the classroom ... and that families with infants and toddlers bring more than a need for parenting skills into a family support centre. It is an examination of these realities ... that has resulted in a new wave of state and local initiatives to provide more comprehensive and integrated services to children and their families. (Bruner et al. 1992, p.1)

Contexts

The importance of contexts

There are compelling reasons for understanding the context in which projects like this one are undertaken. Contexts inform and provoke us; they add impetus for change and explain our processes to others. The establishment and progress of the community Hubs discussed in this document take place within multiple contexts. They are essentially an exercise in community development and as such are 'complex and interactive process[es] that both shape and [are] shaped by the immediate and surrounding environment' (Hudson 2004, p.11). The issues discussed in this work are clear examples of this intersection and demonstrate the interconnectedness of people, place, circumstance and opportunity. The contexts that play a part in these projects, broad and more local, are therefore worth exploring further.

Broader contexts

The broad context for these projects is predominantly based in policy directions generated from state and federal governments. A brief description of the key policies provides a strong background for the move to a more integrated approach in services for children.

Communities for Children

Communities for Children is a project of the Australian Government funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. Communities for Children works to support the health and early development of children and families and is based in six suburbs within Hume City: Broadmeadows, Dallas, Jacana, Coolaroo, Meadow Heights, and Campbellfield.

Premier's Children's Advisory Committee report, *Joining the Dots*

The Victorian State Government's recent Premier's Children's Advisory Committee report, *Joining the Dots*, refers to integrated services many times and encourages the move to a more collaborative approach.

Services should be more integrated with each other, co-located physically where this meets local needs, and delivered within a coordinated, system-wide and multidisciplinary approach to service planning and development ... The Committee strongly endorses the Government's commitment to establish new multi-purpose Children's Centres across the State, but notes that other opportunities also exist for the integration and co-location of services. (Premier's Children's Advisory Committee Report, 2004, p.4)

Best Start, Broadmeadows Action Plan 2003

Best Start is a place-based, whole-of-government, Early Years project jointly auspiced by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Education. The Best Start DHS Guidelines 2003 identified schools as community Hubs as a natural focal point for service integration. Integration is needed to ensure that children experiencing disadvantage will not be

deprived of the opportunity to benefit from participation in Early Years programs. The Best Start Action Plan identified Meadow Fair North and Campbellfield as sites interested in community collaboration. In 2007, six Hub sites have been identified.

The Best Start community consultation with parents has indicated their interest in bringing programs together into a family centre or venue where they can meet other parents and discover what is available. There is a need to resource parents in their own right to build social and community networks.

The Victorian Government's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood COAG National Reform Agenda, March 2007

This national reform agenda has recently highlighted Victorian Government policy in relation to Hub activity and service integration in disadvantaged areas:

Addressing disadvantage in the early years can end generations of disengagement for individual families and whole communities, and provide children with the opportunities to break the cycle of disadvantage.

Action 8: The Victorian Government recommends enhancing the capacity of local government to provide local area coordination and integration of Early Years services towards the creation of child friendly communities.

Action 39: The Victorian Government has already committed to co-locating ECEC facilities in schools, wherever possible.

Hume City Council Global Learning Village Strategic Plan, 2004

This plan has prioritised neighbourhood Hubs as a focus for its 'learning community strategy'.

Hume City Council has a number of co-located Early Years services on or next to school sites. Schools, child care and early childhood programs are expected to be the platform on which the concept of a learning community can build.

It is obvious from the broad policy activity in this area that there is strong support for individual services to develop more integrated responses to future development. An injection of funding associated with these policies will assist the implementation although this will need to be supported locally.

Local contexts

Locally the community in Hume City has attracted and generated much attention in recent years. State and federal government initiatives have focused on projects that address issues of disadvantage. Local government has established plans to strengthen community health and wellbeing. Alongside this, individual neighbourhoods, organisations and agencies, including schools and other community services, have explored new ways of working together and are actively looking to create an innovative response to the needs of local residents. Of particular

interest is the School Regeneration initiative which will have a significant impact on the future of schools in the Broadmeadows area and represents an important opportunity to secure a long-term integrated approach. Other significant influences include:

- Broadmeadows Neighbourhood Renewal site (state government initiative) that contributes to the local energy and increased community activity for several of the projects
- The rollout of the new Child Welfare act—Every Child Every Chance—that is premised by a commitment to a more collaborative approach to child welfare
- The Hume Municipal Early Years Plan, currently in development but predicted to support a whole-of-community response to the provision of children’s services
- Local delivery changes to maternal and child health (MCH) practices driven from a state government review have meant that flexible delivery options are more possible.

The Hub projects are positioned within a climate of change that supports a more integrated approach. Whilst there have been significant local issues that have led to service delivery constraints, in particular the lack of MCH staff and recruitment difficulties, each site has developed significantly throughout the first stages of the project.

Setting the hubs humming strategy

Creating inclusive meeting places for family engagement

The Communities for Children *Setting the hubs humming* strategy, under which the projects outlined in this document were supported, aimed to build a greater sense of belonging for children and families to services within the community, particularly children's services. The strategy aimed to create dynamic child and family services that offered a responsive range of programs that met the diverse needs of the community. It drew on essential elements from the existing services (e.g. child care programs, staff and expertise) to form a strong integrated model.

The sites were chosen because they had a range of community facilities and centres that either acted already as community Hubs or had the potential to develop in this way. The projects identified opportunities to make these sites into more active, engaging and 'humming' Hubs through activities designed to engage community members and enhance services.

As part of the project a reference committee was formed made up of representatives from each of the community Hubs. This group worked to explore and document the development of the Hubs in the Hume sites and to ensure the sustainability of early childhood-focused meeting places in each of the Communities for Children neighbourhoods.

Location of Hubs projects

The Hub sites discussed in this document were located either in primary schools or in central neighbourhood venues and increasingly became a magnet for new activities as the depth of the connections developed. They also became vehicles for coordination across the health, education and community sectors, and between universal and secondary agencies. Importantly most agencies in the Hume Early Years Partnership (e.g. Anglicare, VASS and the Smith Family) developed an interest in locating activities and sharing resources around neighbourhood Hub sites. This added significantly to the operation of a model of service integration. The sites were located in the following neighbourhoods:

- **Campbellfield:** Campbellfield Heights Primary School and Campbellfield Heights Preschool, VICSEG playgroup, Language and Literacy Enrichment program
- **Jacana:** Jacana Primary School, facilitated playgroup
- **Broadmeadows:** Meadowbank Primary School and Meadowbank Early Learning Centre and community outreach to families
- **Broadmeadows:** Meadow Fair North Primary School and Meadow Fair North Preschool, three-year-old activity group, and maternal and child health service
- **Broadmeadows:** Lahinch Street Maternal Child Health Service, playgroups, outreach service, ATSI project

- **Meadow Heights:** VisyCare, playgroups, occasional care, adult education and maternal and child health service, parent-child Mother Goose program.

Targeting families with young children, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, shaped the type of activities undertaken in each site. The following table indicates the nature of the activities offered and provides insight into the type of models used in each site.

Jacana Juniors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for parent volunteers on playgroup leadership; development of cross-cultural materials to enhance sustainability of the existing program and funds to enhance the service by inclusion in the playgroup network and the Sing and Grow or Mother Goose programs.
Meadowbank Early Learning Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project will build on an existing program to further strengthen the links between families, community groups and support services. Family information and developmental programs will be delivered on-site at Meadowbank Primary School.
Breaking Cycles by Building Neighbourhood Hubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration projects in three sites in Broadmeadows where services will be delivered with an integrated approach, including employment of bilingual workers to collaborate on culturally appropriate program delivery and minimisation of barriers to services.
Meadow Heights Language and Literacy Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingual workers will use Visy Care's centre to work in partnership with existing services to outreach to CALD families in literacy and language activities.
Broadmeadows Early Years Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity-based program set on a weekly basis for children 3 years plus, targeted at CALD families not accessing services in an area that does not currently have an early literacy program (very likely to be Campbellfield).

The Hubs strategy will operate for the duration of the Communities for Children project. It will cost an estimated \$212,084 for the financial years 2005–06 and 2006–07.

Defining a Hub

Defining the nature and context of a community Hub has emerged as an important part of the development of a local integrated approach. It is obvious from our experience that one size does not fit all and that the local interpretations are critical. Early Years Hubs are defined around local neighbourhood needs and as such the types of programs involved differ although their key elements remain the same. It is helpful to note that various terms, all equally useful, are used to describe Hubs, such as Community Hubs, Children's Hubs or Early Learning Hubs.

Essentially the Hubs are defined as welcoming places that respond to family and cultural practices and act as a key mechanism to community engagement. In particular Hubs assist parents with limited resources, or those who are socially isolated, to connect more easily to services that enhance life chances. Early Years Hubs, in particular, draw essential elements from the existing services into a collaborative model and coordinate activities with a common set of objectives and outcome measures. Improving the level of participation of children in early learning programs, removing existing barriers to access and improving the design of programs based on local needs are common indicators of success.

Key components

A useful process in defining the Hubs is to highlight key components. These components identify Hubs within a context that extends beyond a place focus. They describe both locational and conceptual ideas that we have found important in the integrated work of the project. The components are:

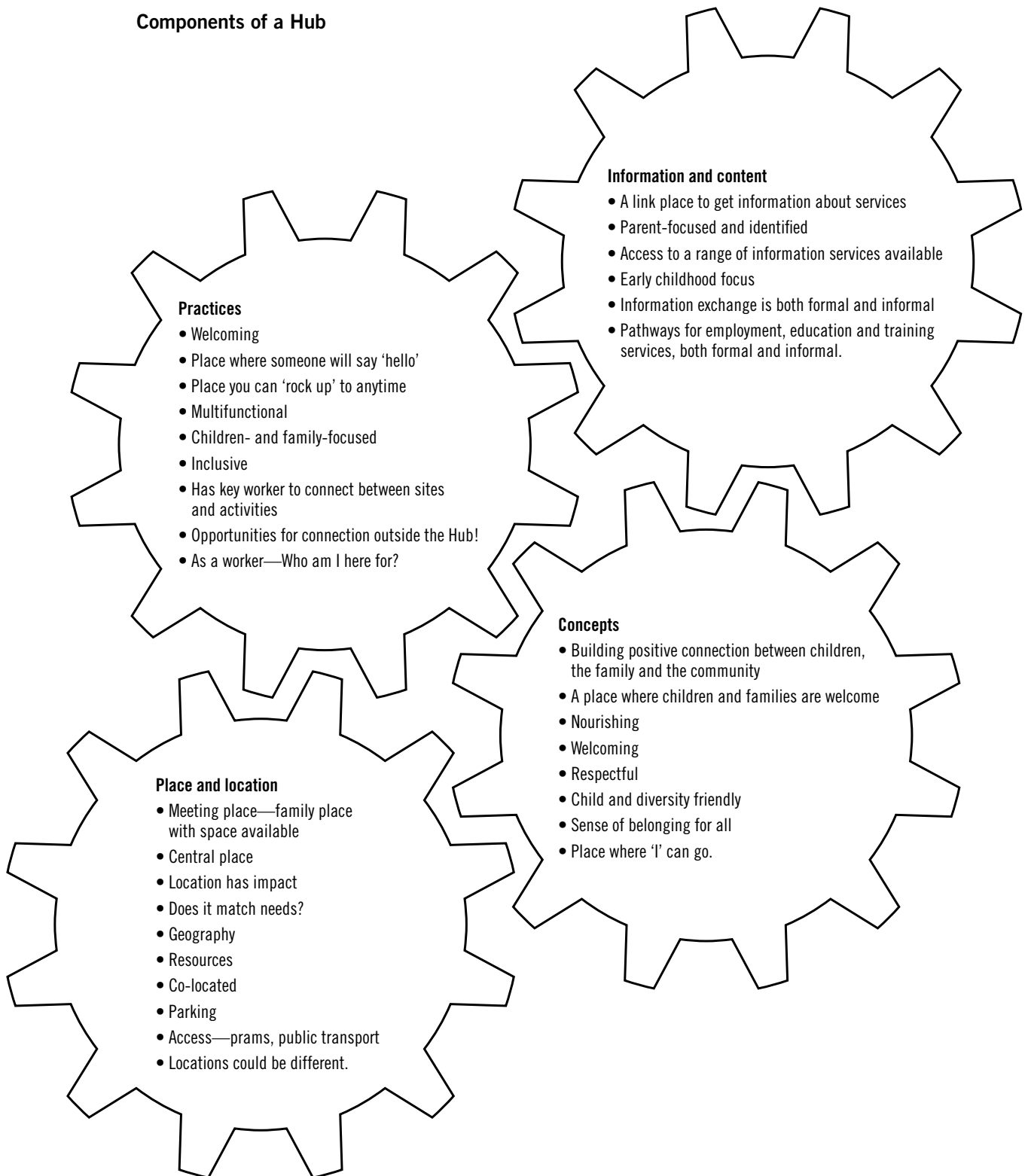
- **Information and content**—this describes some of the inclusions in the Hubs that have proved successful. This is in relation to what information is provided and accessible to families.
- **Practices**—this describes the important practice element and the approach staff take with families to create a Hub environment.
- **Place and location**—this describes some of the elements included in the physical environment.
- **Concepts**—when these elements are considered and integrated, the outcomes for families are improved and services become more accessible.

Throughout the project we have used the analogy of hubs and cogs to illustrate the components of Hub sites, the role they play and how they connect and link with other services. The hub turns moving the cogs that are linked to other cogs which create complementary movements. The hub is representative of the core service or the site; the cogs represent the links and networks that are created through collaboration, and the motion represents the unified movement with others that occurs in integrated practice.

These components can and do occur individually. However, it is the experience of the group that when these components occur together or 'interlock' the results for communities are positive.

The action or ‘motion’ of the singular components has a complementary impact when in action with the other components identified. The following diagram expands on some of the elements to work within each component while illustrating their interconnection.

Components of a Hub



Understanding the models

There are many questions surrounding the actual practice or daily operation of Hubs. This section aims to answer some of those questions by exploring what Hubs look like at a local level, providing different models of location and integration. It also identifies the step from location to integration as a means of assisting others to place their own practices into a process of becoming more integrated.

What do Hubs do at a local level? Co-location to integration

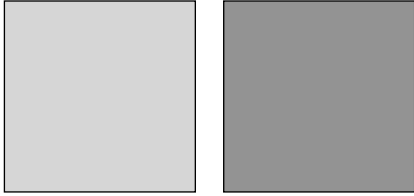
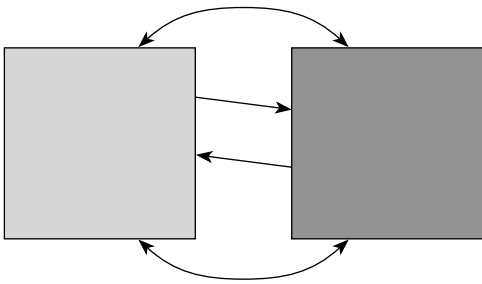
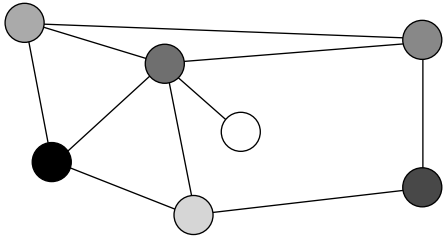
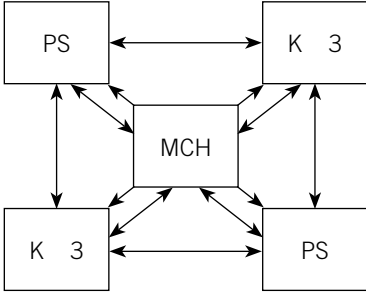
Hubs development usually occurs in two ways. One with a focus on buildings that are co-located in a specific neighbourhood (e.g. Meadowbank Early Learning Centre) or developed through shared governance arrangements which then informs the structure, design and integration of buildings (e.g. Bluebird Way Family Centre).

It is important to note that the idea of integration extends beyond the limitations of location into models of practice. Relationships and links between services become the purpose and driver of integration. Co-location is an important element that can greatly assist integrated approaches. However, it is not an end in itself. Rather, integration is an approach that can be implemented unencumbered by geography, particularly when the following are considered:

- focus on the needs and priorities of local families
- neighbourhood community engagement
- informal meeting places for parents with young children
- linking parents to each other and to local education, health and community resources
- joint planning and coordinating across early years sectors
- reshaping and integrating programs to respond to local community needs and cultural practices
- increasing the responsiveness and capacity of programs offered.

The range of models of Hubs therefore includes:

- co-location of activities/services at one site or next door to each other
- cooperation where services share ideas and approaches to engage the community
- a Hub precinct where services operate within walking distance from each other and there are strong links and healthy relationships between service providers
- an integrated Hub with pre-planning, shared governance and decision-making, connections between services or outreach programs (long-term activities).

<p style="text-align: center;">Co-location</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-location: two or more services are located on one site. This provides an opportunity for integration and Hub development but does not equal integration.
<p style="text-align: center;">Cooperation</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation: the beginning of integrated approaches where services begin to share ideas and work together.
<p style="text-align: center;">Hub precinct</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hub precinct: where various services are located in walking distance from each other. It is in the links between services that integration occurs rather than on a specific site.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration: where integration is planned for and implemented at all levels. Services have shared governance and decision making.

Service coordination roles

The success or failure of the Hubs rested, in large part, with the professionals who worked in them. The impact on the relationships that are formed between children and families cannot be underestimated. This section describes the potential roles for professionals in integrated Hubs, drawing from the experience of the individual projects in the *Setting the hubs humming* strategy. Through their unique role, skills, experience and relationship with families, each service is valuable to families. Value can be added to the suite of services available to families when professionals act from their skill base in collaboration with other services and professionals. The outcome for families is increased access to information, activities, programs and opportunities that are available. The roles have been expanded on below for maternal and child health nurses, preschool teachers, primary school principals and teachers, school support staff, secondary services, bilingual workers, parents, community development or liaison workers and the community.

The role of the maternal and child health nurse

The maternal and child health nurse (MCH) has a wealth of knowledge about early childhood health and development to offer Hub activities. They can provide secondary consultation to the other workers at the Hub site if staff has concerns about children's health and wellbeing. They are a vital link to formal services for playgroups, which are more readily engaging families who may be distrustful of formal/institutionalised services. MCH nurses can assist with planning open MCH sessions and informal parent gatherings to engage with more hard- to-reach and isolated parents.

Maternal and child health nurses provide a key link of referral to secondary and tertiary services and early intervention for families. Nurses who work only part-time at a site can benefit from learning about key contact points and the needs of the local community in more depth from other Hub workers, preschool teachers and school principals who are immersed in the community every day.

The role of the preschool teacher

Preschool teachers have a wealth of knowledge about early childhood development to offer Hub activities. They can engage parents in understanding how they can support their child's health development, through informal contact at the beginning and end of sessions and by referring parents with children under preschool age to playgroups. Preschool teachers are a key source of referral to health and community agencies if there are developmental concerns with the child, or a need for additional support within the family. Preschool teachers can make use of resources from the Free Kindergarten Association, Multicultural Resource Centre or other bilingual workers, who can help with the participation of children with limited English, and also use interpreters to help communicate with parents.

The role of the primary school principal and teachers

Principals have taken the lead in some Hubs to allocate schoolrooms and resources to meet community needs. Teachers further develop the partnership role with parent–staff contact; some schools hold regular meetings with parents and involve them in school or community engagement activities. The role of the principal in building trust, listening to parents’ concerns and linking parents to health, welfare, English classes and other lifelong-learning contacts for themselves and their child, is a key aspect of the school’s leadership in Hub activities.

The role of school support staff

A welcome environment and the sense of respectful engagement between all staff and the wider school community reflect the service culture. First impressions for parents are often from school support staff. These initial interactions reflect our commitment to providing best practice in building relationships with families and can influence and encourage cooperative outcomes.

The role of secondary services

Family support and community agencies have offered resources to Hubs to better meet local community needs. These agencies are more likely to refer more vulnerable families to Hub activities as they can be confident that they are welcoming to and inclusive of all parents.

The role of bilingual workers

Bilingual workers are essential to parent engagement in Broadmeadows Hubs. These workers may be employed in one service, but may be able to provide advice, parent information and translation and interpreting for other agencies involved in the Hub. Bilingual workers can be supported in their work through access to professional development opportunities, for example, training in a strengths-based model of family engagement.

The role of parents

Parental participation in Hub activities can be increased through involvement in shared decision making and planning. Parents may volunteer to organise activities and events and interpret for parents with limited English. Parents may also be able to communicate to local families about what is occurring at the Hub, and introduce parents to the workers. Benefits for parents are that they have a place where all of their children, up to eight years of age, can be involved and welcomed, and they have a say in how the Hub is developed.

The role of community development and parent/ community liaison

The role of the community development worker, parent/community liaison worker or, in the case of the Hub projects, the project worker, should not be underestimated. There is potential to do a number of things in this role. There is the capacity to float between services, spending time creating the links that other workers cannot do due to the requirements of their core role.

This position is of increased importance especially in the commencement of projects or Hub activities, where additional time, resources and flexibility are required to establish strategies and systems. Key roles for this position are to mobilise resources, spread the word and follow up interests of the group as identified. This role assists to encourage and trial integrated approaches internally and then to extend this approach externally to engage both the community and services in the Hub.

The role of the community

There is also a potential role for the community or the neighbourhood and its members in Hub sites. This can extend beyond the conventional roles that may be associated with working with children and families. Hubs provide a place for the development and use of community members' skills and ideas. Potential is limited if participation is limited to only those with direct involvement with the schools or services involved in the Hub. Being connected to community groups and networks, in both Early Years and beyond, can open up opportunities that may not have been considered.

Outcomes of our local experience

Understanding the outcomes of an integrated approach is a powerful tool. Not only is the impact of interventions measured and developed but practice experience is recorded for advocacy and promotion. This section outlines some of the outcome measures, meanings and results of the Hubs projects spanning the last two years. It also includes findings of the local evaluation of the last 18 months of Communities for Children.

Outcome measures for Hubs

A range of outcome measures was utilised throughout the project. Detailed data is available through Communities for Children for the current round and will continue to be collected into the future. Importantly the outcome measures are both qualitative and quantitative, enabling the strategy to capture both strengthening relationships and increasing numbers in attendance and engagement.

The specific outcome measures used throughout the projects followed the Communities for Children Strategic Plan 2005 and include:

- improved child language and literacy
- established and/or strengthened community Hubs
- increased awareness of where to go for help with children
- increased social connectedness and support
- community members take an active interest in developing Hubs
- model developed will be shared within communities to strengthen learning.

Other outcome measures that have influenced our work include:

- Best Start Action Plan 2003–07
- current population level measures of improvement
- Australian Early Development Index (AEDI): Level of developmental strength and vulnerability across five domains of children's development in Prep
- long-term population level measures of improvement (10–15 years).

What has integration meant for services?

By planning together, services have worked to share expertise and develop new ways of engaging families through more informal activities such as playgroups, family fun days, enrolment for preschool information, transition to school programs, bilingual storytimes, early literacy events,

morning teas, and many more. Parents suggested events and ideas they wanted to be a priority to bring people together locally.

For example, on Harmony Day in March 2007, 120 parents participated in celebrating cultural diversity in Hume City. At Meadowbank Primary School 50 per cent of school parents and 75 per cent of early learning centre parents took part and at Campbellfield Heights Primary School 90 per cent of parents and preschool children attended the event. This level of parent participation has not been evident in the past.

It was expected that workers in Hubs communicate regularly during the year and visit each other's sites. Some have gone on to attend joint professional development, share venues and resources and develop protocols and agreed processes as part of developing more collaborative action in the way programs are offered. Bilingual workers within a neighbourhood precinct have also become a vital resource for other workers to communicate with parents. For example, recently staff working at Hub sites attended the Strengths-based Training in Working with Families session funded by Communities for Children in order to develop a common approach to family engagement. This was a first for sectors across preschools, playgroups, nursing, family support and community workers, all coming together to work on a localised approach.

What have been the results of service coordination?

By working in a more coordinated way, children's services and schools have improved access to Early Years programs. For example, cooperation between local government, primary schools and secondary services contributed to increased preschool participation in Broadmeadows. Five schools have opened up classrooms to run parent-led playgroups. Parents have requested English and computer classes for parents in school venues. These results have motivated further collaborative efforts to bring families together locally (*Best Start Local Evaluation Report 2003–05*).

Between 2005 and 2006, Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) population-based results in the six targeted suburbs show improved numbers of children in Prep who have accessed preschool or child care, and a reduced level of developmental vulnerability in children in two or more domains by 9.5 per cent.

In November 2006, the Early Years Partnership meeting offered a presentation on how service integration at community Hubs was working in Hume City. The Brotherhood of St Laurence, Broad Insight Group and Hume City Council presented on model development and the challenges of this work.

Findings of the *Local Evaluation Report*

The five projects working under the *Setting the hubs humming* strategy for Communities for Children each took a slightly different approach to the work undertaken. While the approach varied from project to project, the outcomes and aims achieved were similar and aimed to meet the needs of the local community. The outcomes of the Strategy Group are listed together and while the five projects across seven sites are diverse in delivery and approach, the Hub projects

demonstrate outcomes by providing approaches that are responsive to community-identified needs. The learnings from each project's approach also contributed to a pool of knowledge that was shared within the Strategy Group. (Extract from *Local Evaluation Report 2007*.)

Establishment and strengthening of Hubs

The level of engagement and connection to other Early Years services in the Hub sites has varied and ranges from involvement in networks to little knowledge of other services. The strategy has aimed to increase the engagement and linkages by both establishing and creating new links and initiatives or by strengthening and supporting existing ones. Project workers have become engaged in networks and are more aware of community resources available to meet the needs of children and their families. Strategies to increase networking, communication and coordination of Early Years services have focused on:

- providing opportunities to rethink practice and move toward an integrated approach
- assistance in coordinating and managing local spaces/venues and resources
- providing free activities to engage families
- promoting the benefits of Early Years services and creating links between them
- promoting the role of parents in children's early education.

The strategy has aimed to add value, life and colour to the existing places where parents meet to make them more child and family friendly. Hubs have been strengthened by the facilitation role of the project workers (such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Meadowbank Early Learning Centre), regular communications and meetings, parent activities and cross-sectoral professional development opportunities.

Some of the outcomes for strengthening and establishing community Hubs are:

- staff in each of the sites are engaged in regular communication between services to plan collaboratively
- participation in or establishment of activities to meet the needs of vulnerable families
- community partners developed new jointly planned activities to attract parents
- significant progress in service coordination and collaboration is expected to improve parent engagement
- structured sessions with highly skilled facilitation and bilingual workers have been introduced in certain areas resulting in parents attending and feeling welcomed
- since working across sectors, Meadow Fair North Primary School has seen an improvement in the number of children starting school who have had a preschool experience, from 53 per cent in 2005 to 86 per cent in 2005; in 2007 the figure was 78 per cent

- in some sites strong networks have developed, with joint activities and strategies trialled and planned; in other sites regular attendance is developing
- Harmony Day activities promoting multiculturalism in March 2007 at all sites had a level of parent participation not seen before
- playgroups have benefited from program guidance with the ability to coordinate sharing limited resources across projects
- increased investment in more space and more efficient management of space to include services for children and families resulted at VisyCare Learning Centre
- increased opportunities for joint discussion, collaboration, networking, planning and professional development.

Overall, the responses from the parents have been overwhelmingly positive. The following provides an example of feedback describing the community strengthening of the Meadowbank Hub activities. Parents reported on the benefits, naming activities that helped them to join in, the welcoming and friendly approach and family-oriented atmosphere. The benefits to children were also noted by parents. These included children learning new skills like sharing, learning rules, settling in; and skills such as cutting and pre-reading which were seen as beneficial in starting school and preschool.

Fairy parties and much more!

New activities to attract parents and increase their involvement in Hubs have included playgroups in primary schools, hosting events including a Fairy Party, Pirate Party, Cool Kids Play Sessions, Harmony Day celebrations and accommodating Communities for Children Strategy 3 projects (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Antenatal and Postnatal Women's Social Support Group—Lahinch Street and Early Years Language and Literacy Enrichment Program—Campbellfield).

Increased social connectedness and support for parents

Another important outcome of the Hubs strategy is to enhance social connections and support for families. One of the ways that the Hubs are working towards this outcome is to adopt an 'open-door' policy which encourages parents to become involved in some of the activities of the Hub. Parents are invited to attend the Hub at any time and can expect to be warmly welcomed, encouraged and treated with respect. Through evaluation, the community partners from the Hub sites have shown that families have experienced enhanced social connections due to involvement in the Hubs.

Parents reported:

- participation through opportunities for connection
- meeting socially outside of organised activities
- connecting beyond their current social networks
- being treated as a person and not 'as a second-class person because I don't speak English'
- an extra support network being available in times of need through their involvement
- children's skills increased, especially social skills.

Overall, despite the barriers faced by the strategy, the responses from the parents involved in the strategy activities have been overwhelmingly positive. Social connectedness was the key benefit for the parents attending the groups. For children the key outcomes were the development of skills, such as listening, socialising and engagement with books/stories and songs. Many parents have said that they read to their children or sang the songs learnt with their children at home. This indicates that the programs have encouraged parents to interact with their children outside the groups and all activities have contributed to the development of parent-child relationships.

For staff, one of the learnings has been to use bilingual facilitators to deliver the session to overcome the language barrier. Having access to high-quality bilingual facilitators was seen as key to providing a good program that parents and children wanted to attend.

The level of engagement amongst the projects and partner agencies has increased through regular meetings, networking, service coordination and collaboration. A sense of common purpose and clear goals have been established to ensure that a shared understanding is occurring at all levels. For example, although an information session at the Campbellfield Hub had been unsuccessful in engaging parents in 2006, 13 workers from nine agencies have come together to show their level of support, trust and good will. By 2007, over 170 parents attended the Harmony Day celebrations at the schools, which was a first for the area.

Harmony Day

Harmony Day in March was an event in each Hub that created socialising opportunities for families. Campbellfield had a high level of parent participation with the preschool bringing 95 per cent of their families (46) to attend at the primary school; at Meadowbank over 100 parents attended the celebrations. These results have been achieved through collaboration between all Hub workers to engage with parents.

The project workers have an increased awareness of the community resources available to meet the community needs. Many act as learning and information advocates around early childhood issues generally, and play important roles in linking families with relevant activities and/or support services.

The voice of experience

Meadowbank Early Learning Centre

Building a community environment for optimum growth and development.

The Meadowbank Early Learning Centre is a school-based model which has worked particularly well for low-income families in a disadvantaged community over the past 29 years. Building Bridges initiative evaluations indicate our community's continued interest in project-based activities, using the existing community links and home language volunteers for community development.

The strong relationships Meadowbank Primary School has built with and between local community members and agencies, provide a core knowledge base that can enable those agencies wishing to provide education, health and welfare support.

The establishment of our early learning centre into a Hub strategy provides a case study in strengthening partnerships to improve the health and wellbeing of residents. By providing support for the important transitions and life changes for families, we assist connections into early years' development information and opportunities for interpersonal attachment and wellbeing.

Outside the School Gates, a community report by the University of Melbourne's research fellow Deb Warr, reflects the specific needs in tackling social structural issues, while providing access to early childhood services. Increased awareness of prevailing influences that inhibit children's participation in activities has provided opportunities to explore and develop new initiatives in collaboration with families.

Providing a welcoming environment and responsive programs to meet specific local needs, we encourage participation and empowerment. Innovative initiatives with collaborative networks have encouraged a strong volunteers' pathway to link the community volunteers with parents. This has secured an unpaid workforce in areas of information access and effectively helped them develop new personal skills. The resultant engagement of families in early childhood experiences of local playgroups, bilingual language activities, cultural dances and performances has encouraged access to information and a range of services.

The establishment of partnership opportunities across the sector was critical to maintain and sustain economically the wider network of community groups and organisations necessary to support the projects.

Using existing community links provided structured opportunities for participation, for example, the multicultural garden activities, Let's Connect—Healthy Lunches and Harmony Day. Celebrations have allowed families to engage with other residents and become a part of the success of the experiences while developing understanding of individual cultures and pride in each other's achievements and in the neighbourhood.

Campbellfield Hub

Campbellfield Hub is where the level of community and service provider engagement has improved most noticeably. In 2006, Anglicare, Melbourne City Mission, Victorian Arabic Social Services (VASS) and Victorian Co-operative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) offered Communities for Children projects and agency-funded activities in Hub sites.

For Campbellfield, this has meant that over a 12-month period, five new Arabic-speaking bilingual workers are now working in the Hub site. These are:

- playgroup coordinator located at the primary school and offered by VICSEG
- teacher recruited for the primary school
- speech pathologist working with children and families one day per week in the year before children start school (Upfield Communities for Children Project)
- family support worker offered by Anglicare
- family support worker offered by VASS.

Improving the access to bilingual workers at the Campbellfield Hub has also led to a better understanding about the needs of CALD families. These workers have been available to communicate with the parents about the importance of the Early Years and link parents to programs and other services.

Joint planning and resource sharing between agencies worked to ensure Campbellfield Hub had toys and equipment to begin their playgroup program, which had previously been trying to get started for three years without success. The school offered the venue to run the playgroup, Broadmeadows Uniting Care provided toys and VICSEG recruited an Arabic-speaking playgroup leader.

The establishment of a regular playgroup is important as Campbellfield Heights Primary School has seen a consistently low rate in the number of children starting school who have had a preschool experience: 59 per cent in 2004, 47 per cent in 2005 and 60 per cent in 2007. This data indicates that there is more work to be done on this issue by the partners involved in the Hub.

Suggestions for a more collaborative approach to preschool enrolment mean that children can be enrolled for preschool from the new playgroup at Campbellfield, through promotion in the school newsletter and through parent-engagement activities. This approach has been effective at Meadow Fair North, Meadowbank and Campmeadows preschools.

Barriers to Hub development

The following barriers have been highlighted to illustrate some of the situations that have impeded our Hubs development. These barriers have been listed because of their importance to integration. Within each of the key categories there are powerful opportunities for real progress once issues are overcome. Each issue has been addressed, with various levels of success, through our work. This has been undertaken with considerable reflection and planning which has been essential to the progress of the projects. Barriers have been experienced in the following key tasks and stages. Enablers that address these barriers are included in the next section.

1. Getting started

It took more time than anticipated to get started, which meant that families were sometimes anxious about what was going to happen to services. There was often an extra load on existing staff as logistics were finalised. This made the task of explaining the purpose and work of the Hub difficult.

2. Staffing—recruitment, roles, development and engagement

Staffing proved to be a complex task. It took a long time to recruit and develop staff, as opportunities for professional development around this work were limited. There was a particular staffing barrier to key groups of staff, for example maternal and child health nurses, and the structure of services meant some staff had less capacity to work collaboratively due to demands on time (only appointment-based, face-to-face contact was catered for).

3. Establishing joint visions

It takes significant time at the beginning to set up, establish objectives, and share ideas before any activities can start. Doing this work can be challenging particularly as it is an ongoing process and takes considerable time.

4. Managing multiple partnerships

Several organisations have multiple relationships around the Hub work—this was sometimes complex to manage, especially given competing timelines and objectives.

5. Community expectations

There were substantial concerns expressed by the communities around the Hub about what would happen after the funds finished. Managing community expectations, once built, was particularly complex.

6. Entering into existing organisations that have their own way of operating

Entering into organisations that have a different focus was sometimes a complicated task. Fitting in with existing programs, matching formal and informal approaches and coordinating competing

interests took time and effort on all fronts. Bringing Early Years ideas into community organisations was a relatively new idea for many, creating extra workloads for busy staff. The part-time nature of work meant that some staff were not always able to be a part of the activities that were planned.

7. Scepticism

Workers balancing the additional work required with the benefits associated with Hubs meant that at times scepticism was high. Staff from management to on-the-ground workers who were unsure of what the project was about, needed to experience ongoing communication about the work to prevent project fatigue.

8. Segmentations

It can be difficult to blur lines across different roles within Hub projects. As a result segmentation can occur:

- roles—people see their job as separate to the Hub idea (e.g. ‘I’m a teacher, not a family worker’)
- internally—the activities offered within a service have no cross-over although they are compatible in outcomes and targets
- externally—activities and programs are run separately when there is opportunity to run in collaboration.

9. Dealing with change

Resistance to thinking beyond the square and doing things differently are an ongoing issue. Lack of communication within teams meant that key staff stifled change. When there was limited organisational support for change, it caused difficulty and slowed progress.

Enabling opportunities

The following section outlines some points to consider when commencing similar projects. These points highlight successful and important elements of the various projects or barriers experienced. They have been divided into two components: Plan and Approach. The first section Plan refers to elements that can be planned for and developed in strategies to assist the project's implementation. Approach refers to the approach that, when taken and fostered, assists the ideas of integration and Hub development.

Plan

Getting started

Experiences that enhance the participation rates of families require careful planning and promotion. Working in local partnerships with positive values systems enables a coordinated approach to joint planning and network establishment. To understand the culture of the local area, staff orientations must be planned for and sufficient time provided for developing connections.

- There is a need to establish clear and transparent objectives, core values and a mission statement.
- When establishing 'timelines' for projects allow sufficient time for the 'start-up' process, talking to your key audiences.
- Be aware of processes and timelines of different organisations.
- Allow for advanced planning to meet agencies' timelines.
- Spend time meeting with each other at the beginning—staff, parents, managers and community.
- Allow time for people to get to know each other before the 'real action' begins.
- Getting started is not a linear process: acknowledge that part of it will be the process as well as a point to arrive at.
- Establish a clear budget.
- Establish what each partner has to bring to the table regarding expertise.
- Discuss what you already know—share ideas and background.
- Taking the first step together is the biggest stepping stone in the project and needs to be a planned and well-communicated event with all parties.

Vision

A strength-based approach to developing the Hub's vision and mission statement will identify key values and goals and reflect the philosophy of the parties involved. Fostering an atmosphere of shared development will drive a common understanding in and commitment to the united enterprise.

- A vision is essential and can set the direction towards which the Hub will travel.
- Listen to each idea and perspective and bring them together.
- A Hub is common ground—it needs to be accessible to all levels within the project and needs to have a strong sense of value.
- Bring staff on board early in the vision process.
- Don't underestimate the importance of the connection between practice and the vision.

Recruitment of staff and staff development

It is well understood that staff make a significant difference in the quality of the programs delivered. Therefore time and effort should be spent in recruitment and the development of staff.

- Develop jobs that are interesting, challenging, and achievable.
- Ensure that staff have time to develop skills and access high-quality and relevant professional development.
- Mentor staff into a new way of working.

Partnership development

Communities for Children has provided an opportunity to develop projects within the network of the Early Years Partnership. Collaborations are constantly sourced to inform discussions about change at the local level. The outcomes of partnerships are powerful and afford an opportunity to refine service delivery and change from a competitive philosophy to one of mutual support and encouragement.

- Create opportunities for key players to come together to:
 - map current services
 - identify gaps
 - determine project activities
 - map agency roles—set clear goals, aims and missions.
- Link into established working groups and resources.

- Don't reinvent the wheel—start where others have had success and use other people's ideas and strategies if they have resonance in the new site.
- Partnerships assist the important work of early childhood.
- Reporting mechanisms should be both informal and formal to continually develop the networking opportunities.
- Partnerships can work in unexpected ways, look out for them.

Community publicity

Informal and formal processes for communication are constantly sourced to promote a two-way exchange of ideas. Linking staff in interest-based networks to the established home language groups facilitates an exchange of information at the grass roots level.

- Ensure language use is appropriate to the audience.
- Promote, promote, promote! The community responds in such a positive manner when they can physically see the work. 'Ownership is the best publicity'.
- Never stop selling the idea, never stop talking it up—it takes a generation of engagement to change ideas and increase participation.
- Ask parents from CALD communities to sell the message in their language, word of mouth.
- Celebrations are an important tool for publicity and ongoing support for projects.
- Check the meaning of key words in other community languages. Find similar words that other cultures can relate to!

Resources/Budgets

Collaborative partnerships can support cost-effective management of shared resources and personnel while attracting funding for community development projects. Community resources can be made accessible in joint initiatives and encourage peer support and skill sharing.

- See key people as resources to support the project.
- Make allocations for:
 - training/education
 - documenting/researching.
- Use partnerships to attract increased funding.
- Value volunteers.
- Save money by several organisations contributing to the one activity. For example, all put in \$100 making something possible that no one had the resources to do previously.

- In kind support is extremely valuable—a venue, some expertise.
- Lobby and advocate for money to be allocated differently within organisations.
- Raise the profile of the work so that the government of the day understands and respects the value of Early Years along with its capacity to empower community ownership, direction, education and sustainability.

Approach

Leadership

Management support and commitment are needed in responding to the ethos of the Hubs concept. The ability to build a vision and empower and energise others to achieve their vision will have immediate and long-term benefits for providing services in our community. Recognising and acknowledging the personal strengths of others and empowering leadership development and community ownership of projects build interpersonal skills. Managing relationships and building a positive approach to communicate workplace change create a positive culture where Hubs can thrive.

- Make sure communication is good—let everyone know what is happening.
- Oversee problem solving and address tensions when they arise.
- Be clear, communicate what is happening.
- The capacity to make decisions is critical—decision-makers must be a part of the process.
- Leadership is crucial—don't underestimate the power of leadership—formal and informal, professional and community.
- Catch good leaders—never let them go!
- Lead from behind, lead by example—enrich people and communities.
- Use positive change management strategies with long-term aims that are clear to all involved.

Relationship building

The impact of relationships between services has a huge impact and is the foundation of integrated services. Relationships develop over time.

- Take time to know the agencies and the community, and set common goals to building effective partnerships.
- Facilitate connections external to the Hub itself.
- Value where others are coming from—listen carefully.

- Take time—relationships are a process—building awareness of other people’s roles and linking/ defining crossovers, as well as things to do together.
- Be respectful with communities; agencies need to feel ready and able to be involved in the process, linking in their own time.
- Never forget the concept of ‘What’s in it for me?’. Try and explain this clearly to all involved.

Inclusive strategies

Social engagement strategies, for example a phone call and personal contact, should be examined constantly and reviewed as a means of checking that the service is inclusive. Inclusive strategies enable parents to be included and involved.

- Be flexible within structures to meet needs as they arise.
- Be cautious about including one group to the detriment of others.
- Be aware of who is not included here—who don’t you see?
- Use word of mouth.
- Engage local parents to bring along others—volunteer outreach is a powerful strategy.
- Consider access issues, cultural restraints, relevance to family needs.
- Use tools to find out information—surveys etc.
- Be careful about assumptions.
- Think of the strategies that can enable parents to be involved and included:
 - reduction of practical barriers, for example cost, transport
 - building positive relationships
 - ensuring value for effort
 - building effective links.

These should be examined constantly as a means of checking that the service is inclusive (Carbone et al. 2004).

Building connections

A communication strategy communicates our desire to acknowledge and support conversations between staff and parents about working together more effectively. Success in relationships involves time and effort and has been achieved by specific strategies of building respect, trust and recognition of personal needs. By engaging individuals in areas of mutual interest we provide insights and develop a mutual code of conduct and opportunities to redirect disruptive behaviour.

- Regularly evaluate your processes—do they need to change as projects evolve?
- Build connections within a community (e.g. geographic) and communities of interests (e.g. early childhood). This is important for children, parents and professionals.
- Recognise that there may be lots of resources amongst the parents that people don't know about.
- Understand the community as much as possible. Who are the key leaders in that community?
- Establish links.
- Forgive past errors and move on—don't let the past hold you back.
- Trust that everyone is doing what they can.

Culture geography

There are many things that limit a community's involvement in programs including distance and geography. Emotional and cultural barriers exist that can prohibit access and encourage social isolation. Awareness of these restrictions can lead to creative solutions and develop sustainable links for families and the effective operation of Hubs.

- Make sure things are within walking distance and pram accessible.
- Consider the physical layout (environment).
- Be respectful of the community: Are places inviting to all? Is the site accessible? Does it have the right tools? Does the community have ownership of the area?
- Cultural components are essential in Hubs in this community; more important than festivals is sharing values about raising children.
- Physical access to the area—are there footpaths, milkbars in walking distance?

Question, question, question!

It is only through constant reflection that we can identify if we are truly meeting the needs of our community. Formal and informal evaluation processes for children, parents, volunteers and staff inform our programs. The importance of asking the right questions and really listening to concerns builds and establishes the direction of our project and supports active participation and attendance.

- Consider how to build into the strategies and structures ideas that mean parents are able to participate regardless of costs, transport and other barriers.
- Build into structures ways of talking to the children about Hubs and school; increase the scope of consultation.
- Never lose sight of the people and where the project was born.

- Ensure culturally relevant programs are being run and sensitivities are respected.
- Explore scepticism—what is the expectation behind it, how can that expectation be developed?

Personal attributes of the workers

Many of the enabling strategies identified are personal attributes of the workers involved in a community Hub project. When found, these people have had an immense positive impact (important for recruitment). This however does not in itself define effective integration strategies. The attributes of ‘can do’ people or positive-change agents can be fostered within organisations. That is, the structure must encourage this way of working. Some of the enabling elements are:

- willingness to be involved—a ‘can do’ attitude
- flexibility
- good communication around the ideas/projects
- trust—building this as a basis of work
- a belief that the project is not run in isolation and is part of greater connections
- open to involvement, possibilities of greater connections.

Elements to support these attributes

- structures to support staff and community participation and involvement
- presence—coming in alongside people, being a part of day-to-day operations
- presence of project at a strategic level, for example at management level
- scope for cross-fertilisation between projects (combine resources, opportunities, using existing programs)
- opportunities for staff development in a network—share ideas
- opportunities for networking, sharing ideas, casual interactions, developing strategies, opportunities to try ideas
- opportunities for celebrating achievement
- a sense of reciprocity—big enabling strategy, i.e. give and take.

A way forward

If, as Henry Ford so succinctly put it, ‘working together is success’, the story of this integrated approach has only just begun. The many people involved in these projects—the teachers, projects workers, parents and children—will continue to work together to create services whose primary vision is to enhance the lives of young children and their families. We are confident that much more can be achieved and that this approach will be established across our community.

A big challenge lies ahead. Learn from our mistakes. Build on our successes. Continue to nurture fruitful relationships and most of all seek stronger and stronger connections with children and their families in whose name this work is undertaken.

We hope that this document will assist us in this task and inspire others to join us in this challenge.

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