

# VCI Project : Local Government Forums Feedback Report

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## Introduction

The following overview is a an overview of participant response to the four local government forums held at Bendigo, Wangaratta, Hobson's Bay and Box Hill On April 26 and 27 and May 3 and 4, 2005.

Eighty-three participants representing forty-three Councils participated in these forums which provided an introduction to the VCI project discussed issues related to indicators of community well-being and sought participant feedback to the following questions

## 1. Why do we need to assess community well-being?

Forum responses indicated that assessment of community well-being is necessary in order to appropriately focus local government policy, planning and service provision and provide the basis for evaluation or these processes.

An informed understanding of community well-being provides an indication of current social norms within communities. Well-being indicators function as benchmarks from which to identify the development of positive and negative social trends which may affect community sustainability.

Forum participants indicated that well-being indicators have the capacity enable local governments to:

- identify priorities for action
- inform social policy in line with community needs
- identify problems/gaps in social planning
- be proactive and put in place preventative measures
- respond appropriately to emerging issues (planning)
- guide change
- strengthen advocacy
- identify the complex factors that contribute to community well-being
- maximise efficient use of (limited) resources - evidence based resource allocation
- justify funding and resist inappropriate cost shifting
- align local government activity with community needs and expectations
- enhance accountability/transparency
- create a sense of community empowerment – enhance community engagement – improve community confidence
- to enhance consistency in approach across Victorian local governments

## 2. How do we currently assess well-being?

Forum participants indicated that well-being is currently assessed by local government via a variety of mechanisms with varying levels of adequacy. Whilst

most participants indicated some level of dissatisfaction with current measurement, they were able to identify the following methods of assessment:

- Community consultation – consultation committees/workshops
- Understanding the nature of diversity within communities
- Through councillor networks
- Use of select data sets that constitute well-being
- Trend analysis based on indicator sets
- Formal reporting processes
- Assessing community participation in and utilisation of services
- Community surveying
- Community panels
- Community pulse group (for example 700 regularly surveyed in Yarra Ranges)
- Township strategy development processes
- Assessing the number of people involved in community events
- Assessing community activity in local campaigns

Measurement instruments used by participants to aid the assessment of community well-being include:

- Community Satisfaction Surveys
- Other council surveys
- ABS stats/demographics
- Best Value Surveys
- Burden of Disease data
- Education participation data
- Other agency data

### 3. How would you use indicators of community well-being?

Forum participants indicated that indicators of community well-being would most frequently be used to inform local government policy and strategic planning; inform funding allocations and applications; measure/evaluate the progress and outcomes of local government initiatives; and inform the development of strategic partnerships.

Well-being indicators would also be used to:

- identify areas of need;
- guide resource allocation;
- better target/improve service provision;
- improve reporting and accountability measures;
- source/justify external funding;
- engage community members;
- inform community building strategies/activities; and
- measure progress towards the long term vision.

Other participant responses included:

- Flag areas of concern – trend data.

- Assist in justifying programs to council – council evidence base to justify council decision making and test assumptions.
- Examine Rural Issues
  - ❖ population trends (currently relying on out of date population data)
  - ❖ Youth issue
  - ❖ Housing
  - ❖ Liveability – job, family unit, child care, leisure options etc.
- Support our decision making
- Inform dialogue on community priorities/ community engagement
- Mobilise the community into action
- Build community understanding of itself
- Resource planning and action/ target setting/core planning tool
- Provide vehicle to tap into other resources and activities
- Support the setting of targets
- Checking community perceptions – ‘beyond the squeaky wheel’.
- To report to the community/ accountability tool
- Identify localise and respond to community issues
- Improve advocacy capacity/ put ‘blow torch’ on state and federal governments on areas they need to respond to.
- Establish the links between trends of wellbeing and services offered
- Measure performance
- Support participatory democracy/ support dialogue through information
- Active citizenship
- Build a happier community
- Support linkages
- Support for funding applications
- Identify gaps
- To celebrate community strengths/promotion and marketing of community
- Education tool for community councillors, staff.

#### 4. What are the greatest barriers to council use of indicators?

Barriers to council use of indicators were articulated under the following general themes:

##### a) **Organisational Issues**

- organisational resistance – cost
- bureaucratic structures – top down autocracy
- MAV – not best conduit (don’t consult/too much authority)
- lack of consultation
- lack of influence (does state government think this is important?)
- lack of political acceptance of data/political interests
- fragmented government approaches
- lack of systems/ lack of resources to utilise data
- lack of in house analytical capacity
- ongoing resources and commitment
- complexity of frameworks
- competing priorities

## **b) Organisational Culture**

- shift in council thinking – lack of understanding of vision by council and community
- cultural barriers – in depth discussion needed/ownership
- fear
- reluctance to face up to uncertain future
- reluctance to make decision to change
- internal relationships
- fear of community consultations/ fear that community expectations will be raised
- organisational cultural issues - fear of bad news
- poor use of consultation processes
- fear of failure – lack of skills/confidence in using data/ fear that council can't deliver
- absence of culture to support/share data and measurement
- fear that use of indicators will make council look bad eg. Domestic violence – fear of being measured generally
- Council disdain for data and measurement
- lack of vision

## **c) Data**

- Capacity to access data;
- Relevance of data – LGA level
- Validity of data
- Inconsistency across councils for core measures
- Lack of data/'user-unfriendly' data/irrelevant data/inaccurate data/inadequate/poor quality data/ lack of investment in data
- Difficulty in identifying the right indicators/ complexity (what do we mean by community?)
- Lack of statistically valid indicators/ lack of indicators
- Lack of understanding overall and lack of understanding of what should be measured
- Diversity of indicators that are hard to compare
- Getting local information
- Cost of data and sustaining panel
- Access to data
- Reliability/quality of data / lack of time series data
- Relevance of data – municipal wide/local
- League tables – trade offs – fear of performance interpretation
- Difficulty in measuring different expectations of diverse communities – different values/expectations
- The difficulty in reconciling LGA level and local area level
- Establishing meaningful indicators that reflect community values
- Sheer number of indicators
- Currency of indicator findings

## **d) Staff skills/training/expertise**

- Lack of appropriately skilled staff
- Lack of analytical skills
- Knowledge, time and skills – sheer volume of tasks
- Skills required to interpret data

## **e) Stakeholder engagement**

- Lack of buy in – feedback on surveys
- Community diversity
- Difficulty in mobilising stakeholders in data collection and action
- Stakeholders around the table
- Lack of relationship with community/trust
- Philosophical differences about the ownership of data

**f) Funding**

- Larger municipalities collect more in parking metres than rural in rates
- Resources

**g) Other**

- Unrealistic expectations of local government and what can be done
- Lack of community engagement
- Privacy law and commercial in confidence
- The danger that indicators will increase expectations that government can fix everything

**5. What would help?**

**a) Organisational Issues**

- Relate to best value (benefit extended into the community)
- Better systems
- Council and CEO commitment
- State government acknowledgement and acceptance
- Whole of government approach
- Better definitions of what local government actually does do – what is lg expected to do? What is the contract between layers of government?
- Policy and resource allocation congruence
- Integration and coordination of planning
- Link with others – economies of scale etc.
- Tools for linking to council planning
- State government mandate and resources for agencies to work with councils on indicators/ share information
- Defined and agreed roles of LG/SG/community data provision
- Tools for engaging councillors – more participation across councils
- Improved council organisational structure
- Building into CEOs performance measures

**b) Organisational Culture**

- Open communication
- Finding ways to work together
- Focus on success stories (benefits)
- Council support – common acceptance from whole council
- Recognition of diversity
- Improvement focus – not ‘league table’
- Explicit statement of values eg. Social inclusion
- Linking to a vision
- Genuine whole of government approach to Community Wellbeing – linkage, talking, sharing
- Opportunity for sharing/learning
- Understanding that it is important/will take time to perfect
- More acceptance at council level
- Incentives for councillors to be strategic – not just operational

### **c) Data**

- Use key data sets on local level
- Put information into public domain
- Workshops in how council can use indicators in cost effective manner
- Bottom up community planning – how can indicators relate
- Available data – free – training – assistance for small councils – what's happening in small towns
- Free data from DHS, housing etc.
- Consistent core measures by all councils
- Free data/better evidence base/accessible data/up to date ABS stats/access to state agency data/ better quality data/increased investment in data collection/locally relevant data
- Generic set of indicators (not diminishing the need for local indicators)/ understood locally and at State and Commonwealth/ a 'kit bag' of indicators
- Skilled interpretation of indicators/ increased knowledge and skill in data collection and analysis
- Clear understanding of who holds the data base
- Better reporting and dissemination of data
- Benchmarks for comparison/ examples of how to do it
- Integration of data in planning process
- Clearing house for data (DVC?) – data, period - better data – state government responsibility for data, reliable and worthwhile indicators and collections – a pool of meaningful data both external and internal
- Empirical data use of indicators within community that has led to a better way of life
- Defined and agreed roles of LG/SG/community data provision

### **d) Staff skills/training/expertise**

- Training
- Mentoring/leadership/ training and guidance
- Training and development across portfolios – case studies – practical exercises – engendering understanding – data management – capacity building

### **e) Stakeholder engagement**

- Liaising with other service providers
- Finding ways to work together
- Put information into public domain
- Bottom up community planning – how can indicators relate
- Increased access to council decision making/ planning for the community
- Recognition of diversity
- Mechanisms to connect to stakeholders
- Stronger civics education in community
- More community focus groups
- Better community engagement systems

### **f) Other**

- Focus on success stories (benefits)
- Media cooperation
- Being able to call on external and ethical expertise

## Conclusion

It is clear that both the understanding and use of indicators of community well-being varies greatly between local governments. However there is strong interest in the use of and demonstration of the need for indicators given access to good free data, education and training and assistance with processes for cultural change and community engagement. The forums highlighted similarities and differences between rural and metropolitan councils and issues related to differing levels of capacity and resourcing. Whilst there is a need for a common core set of wellbeing indicators, the need for locally relevant indicators was also demonstrated at the forums.