

# **Experiences in engaging with diversity.**

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## ***Introduction***

I would like to thank the Council of Europe for making it possible for the City of Darebin to attend this gathering and participate in this important process.

I think perhaps that I should begin by telling you a little about Darebin. The City of Darebin encompasses a number of inner ring suburbs of Melbourne – the capital of the southern Australian state of Victoria. Darebin is one of 30 Local Government Authorities that make up Melbourne – one of 79 that make up Victoria and one of just over 700 local governments in Australia. Darebin is home to 128,000 people living in 56,000 households and we are just over four percent of the population of Greater Melbourne.

Darebin is home to one of the largest, most diverse communities in Victoria. The people living in Darebin come from 148 different countries and speak 105 different languages.

About a third of all Darebin residents were born in non-English speaking countries – one quarter don't speak English, or don't speak English well.

We are home to the largest group of Aboriginal people in the Melbourne, and, while the number is relatively small – about 0.2% of the population – 25 different Aboriginal organisations have their headquarters in our city, making Darebin a centre of influence and learning in the contemporary indigenous landscape.

Forty five thousand Darebin residents live below the poverty line- five times the Melbourne average. And the proportion of households earning more than \$100,000 annually in Darebin is half the Melbourne average.

Over 25,000 Darebin residents are affected by a disability of some kind, including physical, intellectual and sensory disabilities.

These people come from all sections of the community and include children, adolescents and adults. Over half the people with disabilities in Darebin are aged over 60 years. And there are 4,000 Darebin residents who are the principal carer of a person with a disability.

And our population is ageing, in line with global trends. We estimate that our four million dollar budget for home care, personal care and respite services will need another six hundred thousand dollars a year by 2021 to meet demand growth.

### ***Engaging with diverse communities***

Community engagement in such a rich and complex environment is a challenge. Darebin Council has invested considerable time and resources into ensuring that Council is responsive to our diverse community. As a result, we have initiated a number of programs that we think are replicable, at least in the Australian setting:

- Our Multilingual Communication Service enables residents who have difficulty with English to communicate with Council in their preferred language. Residents can call the Multilingual Telephone Line, mention their preferred language and be connected to either a Council Language Aide or an Interpreter.

- Language Aides are multilingual staff who receive training and extra pay to act as interpreters. Over 2007/8 our 30 Language Aides took 2,561 calls from local residents who would have otherwise had difficulty engaging with Council.
- Bi-lingual staff are also increasingly employed in our front line and customer service programs – this not only means that residents have the benefit of bi-lingual staff, but it also means that local residents are more likely to be employed in these positions.
- All Council written material includes a brief description of the issue and contact details for the multilingual line.
- The multilingual section of our website also contains information on Council services and projects in the top 12 languages, other than English, spoken in Darebin. We had over 20,000 page visits to our multilingual pages since June, while our entire site had around 75,000 page visits.

Council worked closely with the community to establish two key groups that provide a bridge between their community and Council.

The Darebin Ethnic Communities Council, or DECC, a peak body representing over 70 ethnic groups and associations.

DECC acts as a consultative body to Council for developing appropriate programs and services to meet the diverse needs of the community.

The Council Management Team and DECC cooperate under the terms of Memorandum of Understanding which ensures that we share information and

get together to pursue projects that increase the understanding and awareness of different cultures among Darebin residents.

Some great projects have resulted. We recently screened the final cut of our latest joint effort, *Faith, the art of believing*, which documents young people's views of their own religious experiences.

An interfaith Council has been established and we are in the process of putting a joint bid into the State government to establish an Intercultural Centre – an iconic building in our redeveloped civic precinct that reflects the importance of diversity.

Council recognizes the importance of respecting and honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander desires for community control of Aboriginal issues.

For this reason, we established the Darebin Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Council or DATSICC two years ago. DATSICC is the first Special Committee of Council for indigenous people established in Australia in a mainstream municipality. Councils establish Special Committees under State legislation as a vehicle to devolve decision-making powers from Council to another group.

The Community Council grew out of consultation with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and other residents about the best way to ensure that indigenous people have a real voice in the development of the City.

Guided by the principles of Recognition, Respect and Understanding, Council has delegated decision making powers to DATSICC around issues of concern to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The DATSICC has undertaken a range of projects since their inception including:

- Permanent raising of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags over the Municipal Offices
- An Indigenous economic summit
- Establishment of a Spiritual Healing Walk as a practical manifestation of reconciliation
- Development of an Educational Kit for schools about both the traditional and the living culture of Aboriginal people in Darebin
- A Koorie Night Market – a local outlet for Aboriginal Art and Culture and a place for people to come together.

### ***Community engagement and community indicators***

Australia operates with three tiers of government – there are six states joined in a federation or commonwealth – the commonwealth governs two territories.

Each of the six states has its own constitution and local governments are generally provided for through these instruments. Local governments are a product of the States. Local governments were generally established to manage land and provide local essential services – we have traditionally been in the business of 'roads, rates and rubbish. Over time, however, our responsibilities around land use planning and community services provision have become much more complex and our responses more sophisticated. One could argue, moreover, that as the tier of government closest to the people, and that we have always been the forum for dynamic citizen engagement.

The size and nature of local governments in Australia vary greatly, as you can imagine and approaches to the community engagement and to the development of community indicators vary accordingly. The most successful approaches to the development of community indicators are attached to fully engaged processes that focus on the creation of Community Plans. These

seek first to create useful spaces for dialogue that elicit a common understanding of shared challenges and aspirations and to document key steps to achieve these. Community Indicators may be developed as a by-product of this process. They may be created when the question of 'how do we know' is posed – 'how do we know we are achieving what we set out to do?' - 'how do we know if we are effective?'.

It is fair to say that many local governments in Australia are struggling to come to terms with both the software – if you will – or the processes of community engagement and the hardware – or the technical aspects of measurement and metrics.

There is no national approach to indicator development in Australia – nor any unified view among the seven states and territories. My State, Victoria is probably a leader in the area through agencies like Community Indicators Victoria and the McCaughey Centre.

Members at this seminar will be able to hear from Sue West, from Community Indicators Victoria, who will discuss the value of these processes in more depth tomorrow.

It is also fair to say, hopefully without being too critical of my colleagues, that many Councils would like to have provided some easy way to develop some nice solid indicators without having to go through all that messy community engagement stuff.

Darebin City Council, I hope, is one of those struggling with this issue with some degree of integrity.

### ***Darebin and community indicators***

I would like to talk very briefly about our experience in community engagement with a view to improving community wellbeing.

In 2001 a newly elected Darebin Council envisaged a *diverse and democratic city where people work together to advance community life*.

The Council engaged in a year long process of encouraging community discussion to hear about community aspirations and issues and to set the direction for the next four years – the term of a council in Victoria. The process was called *Working Together* and was sold as a way of 'helping us plan a better Darebin'. Over 5,000 people were involved in a range of activities over the year including:

- Listening posts
- Neighbourhood Focus Groups
- Multilingual Focus Groups
- Public meetings
- Charettes
- Workshops

Alongside this process and to some extent in response to it, twenty eight different community advisory committees have been developed expressly to engage community in different aspects of Council activities. These range from 'Friends' groups through to more formal standing and advisory committees. All groups include Councillor and community involvement and are supported by Council staff.

Together these groups involve over 250 local residents and represent over 4,500 hours of volunteer advice and support for Council each year.

In 2005 Council and it's Advisory Groups defined five aspirations for Darebin in response to the question: What would we like our City to be? Citizens and Councillors concluded that Darebin should be:

- A caring city
- A democratic city

- A responsible city
- A sustainable city
- A vibrant city

The 2005-2009 Council Plan reflected these aspirations and a set of indicators were established to measure our progress towards achieving these. One of the criteria for selection was that the things that they measure and represent are largely within the control of Council. As such, they do not represent indicators of community wellbeing, although some certainly are that. The indicators are a mixture of organisational performance indicators and what could be more broadly called community indicators of wellbeing.

There are five or six indicators per aspiration – a total of 27 indicators. In addition, and because diversity is so highly valued by the Darebin community, we also publish annually a Diversity Report. Both the aspirational indicators and the indicators in the Diversity report focus on the effectiveness of Council in responding to and supporting community diversity, rather than assessing the diversity of our community per se.

Indicators at Darebin, therefore are indicators of Council performance, rather than indicators of community wellbeing - although the two are often closely connected – for example, perceptions of community safety are an indicator both of Council's performance in the area of community safety and also act as indicators of community wellbeing.

So while we have developed some worthwhile and useful processes for community engagement, we have not translated these into a community discussion about the wellbeing of community. This is our present challenge, and, as we stand at the beginning of our four year planning cycle, we are preparing to present options to our newly elected Council with a view to developing local indicators of wellbeing.

### ***Challenges in the development of indicators of wellbeing in diverse communities***

In doing so, we recognise that the development of indicators of community wellbeing is a complex task in such an environment. I would like to conclude by outlining some of the issues we have encountered as we seek to move from indicators of Council performance to indicators of wellbeing. These are reflections of some discussions we are now beginning to have with members of the community.

The City of Darebin is made up of many different communities and the development of a single set of indicators, which is useful for administrators, may mean that the views and needs of some groups are less well catered for than others. While what is important for one group will be important for all (eg – health and wellbeing, a degree of financial security), different communities do have different priorities and will place greater or less importance on different indicators. Perhaps in Darebin we will need to develop a number of different sets of indicators of different communities' wellbeing. For indicators to make any sense, they need to make sense locally – they need to reflect the reality of people's everyday lives.

Linking in with national indicators not only provides a sense of connection with broader agendas, but also tends to facilitate discussion with other jurisdictions and hold potential for the development of joint projects.

Connection with national or state indicators is important to provide both administrators and members of the community with a sense of perspective and comparison. For example, the Closing the Gap campaign in Australia focuses around twelve headline indicators of wellbeing to show the significant gap between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians.

#### Closing the Gap headline indicators

1. Life expectancy at birth
2. Disability and chronic disease
3. Years 10 and 12 retention and attainment
4. Post secondary education — participation and attainment
5. Labour force participation and Unemployment
6. Household and individual income
7. Home ownership
8. Suicide and self-harm
9. Substantiated child abuse and neglect
10. Deaths from homicide and hospitalisations for assault
11. Family and community violence
12. Imprisonment and juvenile detention Rates

Many of the indicators can be measured locally and many of issues are vitally important local Indigenous people – and our DATSICC group is concerned to ensure that Council is a full participant in the Closing the Gap strategy – however there are several challenges to practical use of these: the long term nature of the changes suggested – some, like life expectancy are essentially generational – and others like disability and chronic disease also refer to long term change.

It is well recognised that differences between Indigenous and non Indigenous people in Australia are largely the result of structural determinants stemming from colonisation and that key to redressing these inequalities are processes to support Indigenous people to develop cultural and social structures to generate social capital. There is apparent merit in an argument that suggests a better set of indicators might be established around progress towards these kinds of objectives. Such a set of indicators could be seen as addressing the remedy, rather than focussing on the symptom. Meaningful indicators should reflect things that can be changed. They should be as close as possible to the attribute upon which we seek collectively to act. Perhaps at Darebin, indicators need to be about something we can do.

## ***Conclusion***

To summarise then – from the perspective of a Council with a strong track record in engaging with diverse communities, and which is only just beginning to engage in the development of indicators of wellbeing:

- Engaging with diversity requires investment in infrastructure, systems and personnel.
- Resources need to be put aside for translation, interpretation, child-care, disability assistance, mobility support and related activities.
- Community control of decision making is important – especially for Indigenous peoples.
- A wide variety of contact and consulting methods should be employed – different methods will work with different groups.
- Tap into community networks and find what works for different groups.
- Provide opportunities for people to be involved in what interests them. Provide the means for people of like thinking to come together.
- It may be that indicators of wellbeing in diverse communities need to be:
  - Very local and specific to different communities
  - Connected in some way to broader national or regional sets of indicators
  - Closely reflective of what can be done and linked to attributes that we aim to shift.