Talking Communities: sharing information and ideas for community building

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A major part of community building work consists of gathering information about the community. This report provides a review of qualitative methods used in the Victorian context to *gather information from the community in a way that builds that community*. Findings are drawn from literature and from interviews with program managers and community building workers in Victoria. Based on this review, a web-based users' guide to qualitative information gathering tools will be developed.

The literature review

There is a considerable amount of literature on promoting community participation and on qualitative information gathering methods. Methods are often well described, but typically there is no consideration of the appropriate context of use, tool implementation and follow-up. How useful the tools are for community building is rarely addressed explicitly. Tool descriptions are not linked to discussions of actual community applications. Also, the web-based information is not easy to find without the precise web addresses. There are, however, some comprehensive 'toolbox' websites which the new resource could fruitfully link to.

In the field

17 Victorian community building programs were visited at the project site, including all 10 community building demonstration projects funded by the Office of Community Building and 4 Community Capacity Building Initiative projects. Community building workers participated in the research through focus groups or face-to-face in-depth interviews about the methods they used for information gathering.

Project workers made use of a range of information gathering tools. 26 qualitative information gathering methods and strategies were identified that are used in current Victorian practice. Six tools were described in detail: *using key people as informants*, *table talk*, *conversations with existing networks*, *asset mapping*, *story telling* and *training volunteers to collect information*.

Learning from current practice

A consideration of best practice yielded three main findings:

- In all projects, information gathering happened in conjunction with engagement, the development of a social connection between the project worker and the community and between community members.
- Face-to-face individual contact was important for information gathering and developing relationships, and in general group-based methods gave participants the best chance to meet others and make their own connections.
- The importance of trust and respect was evident. Workers chose information gathering tools according to the need to develop trust. Trust was also developed by project workers' engaging with people, providing tangible short-term outcomes and increasing participants' familiarity with the information gathering method. Consequently, continuity of community workers was an important factor underpinning the success of information gathering and community building.

Community building workers do not use information gathering tools in a linear way. They do not apply a tool, observe how it works and then choose another, but rather choose aspects from a range of methods and form a mix that suits their community. Furthermore, as indicated, each activity generally combines the aim of information gathering with other community building aims, such as engaging, empowering, strengthening groups and developing agendas.

The trajectory of change and community readiness

Information gathering for community building takes place over time, within a trajectory of community change (see section 5.2.1). As community building develops, the stance of the project worker should change from a more *anthropological* attitude to an *action research* approach.

The communities from which information was being sought varied enormously. The readiness of the community for community building practice was central to the effectiveness of the information gathering methods (see section 5.3). The three stages of community readiness are:

- *engaging and stimulating interest*: networks need to be developed and there is not much contact yet in the community;

- *establishing* and developing an action plan: the community already has considerable networks and resources, which may be built on;
- *consolidation*: community building is in underway and the community has some ownership of it.

Formality of tools

The tools used range in their level of formality (see section 5.2.2) and the amount of support required to implement them (see section 5.3.3). The choice between formal and informal tools depends for an important part on the stage of readiness of the community.

Informal tools were important to all projects and were used to find information and engage people across the life of a project. However, in less ready communities more informal tools generally work best and engender more trust than formal tools. Informal tools – such as talking around a familiar table – are most appropriate during the stage of 'getting to know while getting known'. However, a community in the early stages of community readiness may need considerable support in order to make use of such tools. The quality of the data gathered will depend to a large extent on the level of trust established with the participants. Informal methods remain important throughout the development of a community.

More formal tools, such as forums and workshops, are better suited to communities that show more readiness to engage in community building and have already developed resources, such as skills and attitudes, needed to carry them out. Information collected using more formal tools is generally easier to record.

Lessons for the new resource

An information gathering toolbox will be useful in the same way that a recipe is useful: it will work best when it allows users to adapt it to their setting. The set-up of a resource for workers and community members needs to take this into account. The guide may make use of some tools that are already available, but it will need to provide material illustrating their use in accordance with community building aims. The best way to present the tools would be to give simple, clear-cut descriptions of each and to link these to stories and examples of practice that illustrate how they may be used in different community building settings.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

> **The best advice is to think like a cook. When trying a new dish, the best cooks don't follow any recipe precisely. Instead, they look at a number of related recipes, then figure out a course of action that makes use of the ingredients and time available. You should treat any recipe for community organizing the same way: as a malleable guide for future action based on past experience**. *Vancouver Citizen's Handbook*, http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook

The 'Talking Communities' project was designed to support community building practices. Gathering information about the community is a major part of community building work. This report provides a review of qualitative methods used in the Victorian context to gather information from the community in a way that builds that community. Findings are drawn from literature and from interviews with program managers and community building workers in Victoria. This report is the first of two deliverables of the project. Based on this review, a web-based users' guide to qualitative information gathering tools will be developed.

First, an extensive search was undertaken of websites that offer toolboxes and guides for qualitative information gathering. This took a lot longer than expected: the sites available were hard to find and often hard to navigate. This in itself showed the need for a community building portal that provides an accessible guide to qualitative information gathering tools. Printed literature on the topic was also reviewed, and both are presented in the literature review.

Interviews were carried out with community building workers in Victorian projects to find out about the qualitative information gathering strategies they had used and their experience of using these methods. It was not possible to compile an exhaustive list of methods used, as during the interview the community workers may not have thought of all methods used over the years. Also, many projects have experienced changes of staff, so the remembering and retelling of their experiences with the methods was selective. However, a large amount of rich data was recorded. The interviews were transcribed and the data analysed by the research team. Twenty-six strategies and methods were identified. Six tools are presented in closer focus: key people as informants, conversations with existing networks, table talk, asset mapping, story telling, and training volunteers to collect information.

Since community building implies an action research approach, where capacity is being built while information is gained, we assumed that information gathering happens hand in hand with engaging people in the community building process, developing trust and understanding agendas.[1] The field work confirmed that this was the case in current Victorian practice. Therefore, this aspect of the work needs to be presented along with the 'tools'. Case examples and stories (narrative) have been included for this reason.

This report will offer different aspects of value to different readers. The field research offers a close-up look at projects in progress and reflects the understanding of project workers of their communities' situations and development; the 'focus on six tools' may provide descriptions that help workers to fruitfully apply the tools; while the analysis draws out elements and variables that can be used in a community building setting to determine which method would be most appropriate. The future web-based resource on information gathering tools, too, should be flexible and offer a range of material – both clear descriptions of methods and examples from practice – for workers to draw on. It will be useful in the same way that a recipe is useful: it will work best when it allows users to adapt the material to their setting.

[1] Hyman, J. (2002), 'Exploring social capital and civic engagement to create a framework for community building.' *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(4), pp. 196–202.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Aim and approach

This chapter presents and evaluates the web-based and printed literature about qualitative information gathering methods for community building. Many different methods are employed by community and government workers to discover community aspirations, preferences and concerns; some methods are also used to *build the capacity* of the community.

This review seeks to locate the most useful tool kits (or more generic sources) and literature and to evaluate these resources on a set of criteria. We consider whether the resource:

- is *accessible*, relevant and easy to use;
- has a comprehensive *description* of the aims and method of the tools;
- considers the appropriate *context* of use, including community readiness;
- discusses tool *implementation*, including probable developments and possible problems;
- considers how results can be used effectively and *followed up appropriately*;
- discusses the possibilities of the tool for *community building*.

Resources are only evaluated on all these points if they are significant and meet the first two criteria, at least in parts of the document.

This evaluative review will help in the development of a Community Building Resource Service (CBRS) web-based or hard copy resource that will give information about available resources and guidance on how to use them to those working on community building.

2.1.2 The search process

To compile this review of the literature on qualitative methods of information-gathering and community participation within communities, we mapped readily available public resources such as current websites and various forms of published literature. There is a considerable number of websites containing some relevant resources in a community building context.

However, obtaining the desired information from most such sites required extensive commitment of time and considerable persistence (in searching levels and links), as well as some acquaintance with terminology.

In addition, the printed literature was searched for primary material on the use of qualitative methods in settings relevant to community building. Numerous resources are available on specific research methods, but very few of them are appropriate for direct use in community settings with a capacity building focus. A variety of reference material was found that has some background relevance to the area – for example, discussions of social capital – but, again, this is not directly useful for community workers or for those managing community projects and programmes.

Approximately four weeks (full-time equivalent) were spent exploring resources; the searches were thus thorough but not exhaustive. On several specific issues, such as focus groups, the literature was extensive. Consequently, priority was given to finding the sources that were most relevant to community building work and/or to including material that was indicative of the field.

2.1.3 Websites as a source

The rationale for searching websites was that the 'Talking Communities' project aims for community workers and other members of communities to ultimately navigate web-based resources for themselves, even if in a guided manner. While initial links may be provided by a dedicated Community Building Resource Service website, exploration of such linked sites will always require some skills and (quite rightly) considerable autonomy. Websites are notoriously dynamic and evolving sources, references to which can never be definitive.

The relevance of particular websites for this project depends critically on their degree of user-friendliness. We may assume that anticipated users will be well motivated, but not necessarily trained in information technology, research methods or social science disciplines. Without underestimating their skills, we can expect them to be looking for resources that can be readily explored, understood and evaluated in terms of their immediate needs – if only because of time constraints. At the same time, since every situation of application will be in

some ways different, resources that adopt too narrow and prescriptive a style in describing methods may lack the flexibility that will be demanded by anticipated users.

The search for web-based resources was carried out by orthodox web-search techniques, based on searches for strings such as 'Community Building', as well as various specific qualitative research methods such as asset mapping and focus groups. We also made use of recommendations from various colleagues within the CBRS and within Victoria. In each case relevant links were followed. It was felt that this approach would allow us to locate, among others, those resources that are most readily accessible to any user. Obscure websites (for example, sites set up by individual academics, not well linked to larger sites) would probably be overlooked, but this was not a serious problem in the context of the research.

2.1.4 Searching the printed literature

The printed literature was searched using key word searches of selected databases: ERIC (educational research database), Academic Search Elite, Contemporary Women's Issues, Current Contents, Electronic Collections Online, the Expanded Academic Index, PsychInfo and Social Science Plus. Typical strings used were 'community building', 'focus group community' and 'asset mapping'. Many examples of the empirical use of focus groups were found – some in relevant contexts – as well as some resources relating to asset mapping, social audit and various other community consultation processes. References were also obtained from CBRS colleagues and other academics.

2.1.5 Presentation of findings

In the rest of this chapter, first resources are presented that each cover a number of different tools. The most useful web-based material on such toolboxes or handbooks is discussed, followed by the most useful printed literature.

We then examine the literature on three specific tools: asset mapping, focus groups and narrative methods. These tools were chosen because they are very different and are applicable in a variety of situations.

[ ] The numbers in square brackets refer to the numbered references in the Bibliography, where the literature has been sorted into various categories.

2.2 Toolboxes

2.2.1 Websites

We will first discuss some websites that offer community building tool kits or handbooks.

The Citizen Science Toolbox

The *Citizen Science Toolbox* [1] website, developed in Australia, is the single best site. It provides comprehensive details of over 60 different tools for community involvement. While it was developed for enhancing community involvement in environmental issues, the toolbox itself is widely applicable. We will discuss some of the features of this site in some detail.

There are basically two ways to find out about the tools on the *Citizen Science Toolbox* site. The first is using its search function, which asks users for details about the context of what they are looking for. Thus one starts by choosing the purpose from a drop-down menu which provides several options, including 'develop community capacity'. Some other drop-down menus include the budget, expertise available, and time frame. Depending on the choices made, the site will then provide a selected listing of tools relevant to the user's context. The second way to access the tools is to go to an alphabetical listing of the 63 tools described.

Both the selected listing and the alphabetical listing are presented in a very user friendly format, with a further link taking the user to details about that tool. The tools described include those often most useful for community consultations (including focus groups, kitchen table, snowball sampling and surveys) as well as more unusual methods such as the Delphi technique, which relies on web technology. The descriptions of each tool are in dot point form and generally cover two or three pages. Useful sections are 'outcomes' and 'uses/strengths', where points are made such as: 'builds social capital, that is, people who are more willing and able to participate in community decision making and management.'

The website also includes eight case studies, but these present tools that are not the most widely used in community building and all eight studies focus on conservation issues. An

extensive annotated bibliography of over 500 references is also on the website. However, the usefulness of this is limited by its organization (alphabetical listing by author) and the fact that there is no search function, although each reference includes key words.

The Vancouver Citizen's Handbook

The *Vancouver Citizen's Handbook* [2] provides a good guide to community organization, with a focus more on community activities, such as community kitchens and festivals, than finding out about community concerns. The website is organised into four sections; community building, community organizing activities, full text articles, and citizen's library. (The latter has links to many relevant sites, including toolbox sites mentioned elsewhere in this review.) The key section presenting methods is 'community organizing activities', where 22 activities are listed, each having one to two pages of text. Examples include community gardens, block parties, intergenerational activities and study circles.

In the 'full text articles' section there is a useful document entitled 'public participation toolbox', which offers the searcher a comprehensive table that lists tools under the sections:

- passive/active public information techniques;
- small/large group public input techniques; and
- small/large group problem solving techniques.

Each tool is considered under columns headed 'always think it through', 'what can go right' and 'what can go wrong'.

Table 2.1 provides the evaluation results of the two most suitable sites. The criteria for evaluation have been listed in section 2.1.1.

	accessibility	description	consideration of context	implementation	follow-up	community building
Citizen Science Toolbox	+	+	+	+	+	+
Vancouver Citizen's Handbook	+	+	–	–	–	–

+ = yes, good
– = no (or rarely)

Table 2.1 Evaluation of two good toolbox websites

The Community Tool Box

Some very comprehensive sites, such as the *Community Tool Box* of the University of Kansas [3], require knowledge of the relevant jargon in order to navigate them. If one is persistent navigating the many layers, however, there are some gems – such as stories, with sensible comments, of disastrous focus group experiences. While this site does provide a lot of information, the question-and-answer format can be quite disconcerting, especially at the level of specific details about methods to use, and makes it more difficult to get an overview of how a method works. The site has a slightly patronizing style and includes a lot of text. It tends to assume no prior knowledge but encourages self-reflection prior to action.

This site did not meet our first criterion, as the information was not easily accessible. For example, searching the website for 'focus groups' lead to 942 citations.

Consulting Citizens

A useful chart of tools is located in Appendix 1 (p. 31) of the publication **'**Consulting Citizens – A Resource Guide', available on a site of the Government of Western Australia [4]. While the focus is on methods of consultation, in the evaluation of different tools consideration is given to whether they empower and strengthen the community. However, this site did not meet the second evaluation criterion as it did not give a comprehensive description of the different methods.

2.2.2 Printed material

We will now discuss the printed literature relating to qualitative methods of information-gathering and community participation within communities.

Community Participation in Practice: New Directions

A group from Murdoch University have produced a series entitled *Community Participation in Practice* [60, 111–114], which is designed to provide practical guidance to those working with communities around planning and development. These publications contain a wealth of sound, practical information derived from 15 years of consultancy in the area. The series has won five professional awards.

The book *New Directions* [60] is the most useful for presenting some key tools for community building other than workshops and public meetings. Chapter 4 of the book describes qualitative social research techniques such as story telling, action research, focus groups and interviewing, and provides critiques and discussions of their advantages and disadvantages. Chapter 5, which addresses new technologies, covers tools that use the phone, email and Internet. It also talks about planning and conducting community 'summits' on a particular issue. Chapter 6 considers methods involving community art and cultural development.

Toolbook of Participatory Techniques

The authors of the above publications were also involved in developing a *'Toolbook of Participatory Techniques'* [61] for a Victorian local council, the City of Port Phillip. This publication presents 53 different items, mostly techniques, which according to the authors have proven to be useful in involving diverse communities in the decision-making processes of local government. The format is accessible: the description of each technique covers its aim, application, target groups, points to remember, analysis and sources of further information.

The CD version of the resource includes a matrix which essentially cross-lists the 53 tools against the following categories: research and data collection, problem and opportunity identification, development and investigation of alternatives, policy formulation, formal consultation on policy, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. This categorization does not seem as useful as the advice that accompanies it, which notes that participatory

processes are inherently contextual and 'it is vital to attain a thorough understanding of the social, political and environmental context before selecting and applying particular techniques'.

Public Involvement and Consultation Kit

A local council in Britain has developed a similar *Public Involvement and Consultation Kit* [62], which lays out how to choose and use tools. A preliminary section describes how to prepare for consultation, while the bulk of the booklet is the tool kit itself. In a large chart it lists 36 techniques vertically, with along the top a series of potential purposes. Ticks in the chart show whether a particular technique is designed for information gathering, generating ideas, choosing between options, developing community strengths, conflict resolution, analysing problems and/or action planning.

Each technique is described and discussed in a page or less. Because the tools are organised into sections based on their potential purposes, it is hard to locate them in the booklet, compared to if they had been organised differently (e.g. alphabetically). The information on each technique tends to be brief but includes some good ideas that are simple and easy to implement once the user has a group together, such as icebreakers and route planning (a metaphor where the group's objective becomes the destination).

Table 2.2 summarises the evaluation of the three publications discussed.

	accessibility	description	consideration of context	implementation	follow-up	community building
Community Participation in Practice: New Directions	+	+	–	+	+	~
Toolbook of Participatory Techniques	+	+	+	+	+	~
Public Involvement and Consultation Kit	~	~	~	~	–	–

+ = yes, good
– = no (or rarely)
~ = selectively

Table 2.2 Evaluation of three useful printed toolbox publications

2.3 Specific tools

In this section, the literature (both web-based and printed) on three individual tools is considered. The selection of tools was based on the desire to focus on useful community methods that are very different in their approach and applicable in different settings. Time permitting, similar reviews could be undertaken for many of the other tools discussed in section 3.2.

Asset mapping is a tool that is philosophically most aligned with the idea of community building from within. *Focus groups* are the most widely used qualitative method of investigation, while *story telling* or *narrative methods* may be used effectively with a community that is weak in terms of its cohesiveness and readiness to work together.

2.3.1 Asset mapping

Asset mapping was first espoused by McKnight and Kretzman [66, 67]. It involves the shifting of emphasis from a community *services* approach to a community *empowerment* focus. That is, a more bottom-up approach, designed to break or prevent a cycle of dependency.

Two good introductions to asset mapping are the publications by Kretzman and McKnight [introductory chapter to 66] and by Allen [63]. The former notes that the key to neighbourhood regeneration is to locate all of the available local assets and begin to connect them. Allen asserts: 'Community building is finally about relationships, relationships and more relationships.' He briefly describes how to do an asset map and how relationship connections may be made across identified areas. Although checklists are provided, the description of how to implement the method is not very comprehensive.

A very good source for asset mapping is available within the *Community Toolbox* site from the University of Kansas [3] (under 'Learn a Skill' choose 'Community Assessment', chapter 3, section 8). This text comprehensively covers how to identify community assets and resources and shows how they can be harnessed to meet community needs and to strengthen the community as a whole. It provides lots of good common-sense advice.

Another website, the *Community Study Knowledge Base*, [12] was set up at the University of Sydney for health science students who wish to do a project on a community. The site makes a distinction between three different outcomes:

- *community directory* – a compiled list of resources, agencies and services;
- *community profile* – a full description of the community; and
- *community study* – which includes critical analysis.

The first two are more practical, while the third category includes theoretical discussion. The site uses the language of a research project but is accessible and comprehensive, in parts perhaps even too detailed. It is best considered as additional to the above resource.

Two printed resources [63, 68] are also orientated towards asset mapping as a student project: one for public health and the other in the social studies classroom. These could be adapted for a team of community workers or volunteers. They should be viewed as supplementary materials, with good details on implementation.

Table 2.3 shows the evaluation of the two main (web-based) resources.

	accessibility	description	consideration of context	implementation	follow-up	community building
Community Tool Box	*	+	+	+	+	+
Community Study Knowledge Base	+	+	~	~	~	~

+ = yes, good
~ = selectively
* = only with precise web details

Table 2.3 Evaluation of literature on asset mapping

Asset mapping, with its focus on the positive, is different from *social audits* or community profiles, which typically focus both on areas of need and on the connections which can contribute to – or undermine – community building. A comprehensive guide to the latter,

called the *Social Audit Cookbook* (University of Technology Sydney), can be downloaded from a website [8]. Brief summaries are also available in a British local government publication [62]. If engagement by the community is in its early stages, the social audit approach may provide more motivation to community members than asset mapping alone, as it may be seen as more likely to produce tangible change.

Various sources note that asset mapping works particularly well with young people. Young people often respond well to the team approach that can be used for asset mapping. Existing friendship groups can be used, so young people feel comfortable working together, and people with different skills can take on tasks of a different nature. Not only does it become a learning exercise for them (finding out about positive things in their community, including things they may want to participate in), but it also involves making contact with local people of different ages and in different jobs and positions. Thus more relationships are developed, enhancing their sense of community.

2.3.2 Focus groups

Focus groups have been a favourite tool of qualitative researchers for decades. In community research they are used in many different ways, including to analyse problems, deficiencies and needs, and to evaluate the effectiveness of programs or interventions. All the resources listed in section 2.2 discuss focus groups.

The two best resources offering details on how to organise and run focus groups are, again, available on two websites. The first is *A Manual for the Use of Focus Groups* [59], an extensive printed manual that has been digitised. It is laid out clearly and covers all aspects, including data analysis, in detail. The authors are from the University of Queensland and the Phillipines, and the manual often highlights the need to be culturally sensitive.

The second resource, *Gathering Evidence – A Guide for Using Focus groups* [16], was set up by the Cornwall City Council. The website presents about ten pages of text on the topic, with an especially good section on questioning strategies. Coverage of how to analyse the results is comparatively brief.

The *New Directions* book [60] reviewed in section 2.2.2 covers similar areas to the above website, but it has extra extensive sections which (i) critique the effectiveness of focus groups and (ii) consider how to go 'beneath the surface in focus groups'. This is very interesting from a community building perspective, because it includes points about building up the group and making it feel good about itself. The emphasis is on small groups (of six) and on encouraging transformation, such that the participants may leave the group with different motivations from when they arrived.

The *Toolbook of Participatory Techniques* [61] of the City of Port Phillip, also reviewed in section 2.2.2, is especially good for listing weaknesses of focus groups, common problems and remedial actions.

Table 2.4 gives an overview of the most relevant literature on focus groups.

	accessibility	description	consideration of context	implementation	follow-up	community building
A Manual for the Use of Focus Groups	+	+	+	+	+	–
Gathering Evidence – A Guide for Using Focus groups	+	+	+	~	+	–
Community Participation in Practice: New Directions	+	+	–	–	–	#

+ = yes, good
~ = selectively
– = no (or rarely)
= yes, indirectly

Table 2.4 Evaluation of literature on focus groups

There is a big difference between an effective focus group and an ineffective one. In the latter, a group of people are haphazardly discussing a loosely defined topic, while in a successful focus group the participants are highly interactive and are working together to investigate a set of specific objectives [89]. In a community building environment this interaction may be used to help build and/or strengthen relationships between residents of the community.

However, this potential of focus groups to facilitate empowerment is very rarely mentioned in the literature available. The exception is formed by a few publications by feminist researchers in the last five years. Such researchers [e.g. 83, 91] argue that interaction within a focus group may allow knowledge to be constructed by the group collectively and that individuals become empowered as they challenge, question and listen to each other.

Thus, focus groups can offer opportunities for community workers to empower people through group interaction, rather than simply be a tool to gather information about what a community may need or think. An exposition on how this may proceed is given in a case presentation of a study examining women's involvement in the Australian sugar industry [83]. Key components to promote focus groups as potentially helping to build a community include:

- carefully selecting participants into different, small focus groups;
- taking the time to follow up opportunities for building relationships between the group members (as well as between the members and the facilitator); and
- conducting follow-up sessions with the same group.

Various features of focus groups can, of course, be translated to other tools that are less formally structured than focus groups. A variety of community networking activities involve bringing people together into groups to discuss an issue. These too potentially empower participants. In this project we found heavy use of such tools, including *kitchen tables* (also known as *pub talk*, *coffee groups* or *table talk*), *link lunches*, *community issues groups*, *community forums*, *workshops* and *working groups*. The use and implementation of such tools is considered in the various more generic resources (toolboxes) discussed in section 2.2. Their use in Victorian practice is discussed in later sections of this report.

2.3.3 Story telling

Over the past decade there has been increasing discussion of the possibilities of the use of story telling, or narrative, for building a sense of community. Narrative in community settings is popular because it is potentially both a means of non-technical and relatively non-threatening information gathering and a means of community building. Narrative is particularly promising in working with marginalised groups.

Despite the increasing application of story telling, sources offering a 'how to'-approach to using it for community building were hard to find. The best source was the *New Directions* text [60, pp. 77–78], which provides a clear and powerful rationale for the possible role and benefits of using story telling for community development. It also covers the characteristics of stories and the difficulties sometimes encountered. Of particular value is the detailed case study about a highly successful project aimed at creating more supportive physical environments in the disadvantaged suburb of Eagleby on the Gold Coast (Chapter 6, 30 pages). The story telling technique was integral to this and the case study provides a wealth of interesting and moving detail about its use, including a ritual burning of 'bad stories' (i.e. stories that stigmatised the suburb) at the community celebration in the park.

Another useful source about narrative is an academic journal article titled 'Inclusive community in a diverse world' [94]. It includes methodological detail and an evaluation (using focus groups) of what is termed 'narrative-based dialogue'. The paper discusses how this style of story telling is used successfully in self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, and sets out clearly how dialogue (including stories) differs from discussion. 'Dialogues are not meant to seek agreement, they are meant to develop a broader perspective and deeper understanding of complex issues,' (p. 734). In any CBRS materials to be developed on story telling, a synopsis of key aspects of this article in lay language would be useful for community workers.

A website on *Sustainability in Western Australia* contains an article [5] which provides a compelling rationale for the use of story telling in the context of developing a sustainable community. Approximately half of this 19-page article is devoted to the purposes and potential of two tools for community building: story telling and community visioning. The other half presents a series of case examples using the tools. The author notes that the tools are not ends in themselves and hence 'are able to continually build, strengthen and/or renew a community's sense of place'. Unfortunately the methodology of neither tool is covered; the author writes that the next step is for the Western Australian government to develop a tool kit describing the techniques.

In the sources mentioned, story telling is seen as *in itself* helping to build community because it is about developing relationships. However, story telling may also be seen as a prelude to action within the community. Any community seeking information about itself or project

worker wanting to initiate community building will need to integrate and understand accounts of local experience and to base action on them. The stories are not just partial and personal descriptions. Interpretation, of even the simplest of stories, leads to explanation or theorised experience, and to possible action resolutions.

It appears there is a real gap in the literature on story telling as a community building tool, either in itself or as a prelude to action: the relevant processes and/or case examples are rarely detailed or presented in an accessible way.

However, the *Community Arts Network* website [6] does comprehensively present the results of 'an inquiry into the role of story in strengthening community'. The website presents the process and findings of a research project called 'Connecting Californians': a ten month public conversation based around the performing arts, humanities, grassroots narrative and community organising. The researchers explored, and affirmed, the notion that art was a particularly powerful way of building community. They note that interaction with narrative strengthens community in several ways:

- Telling stories gives shape to personal identity, enabling us to link with others and with universal themes.
- Engaging with stories (listening, interpreting, responding) introduces us to others who could otherwise remain distant; it builds empathy and understanding.
- Sharing stories with one another creates human connection, builds relationships and develops a sense of common narrative.

The *Community Arts Network* website is primarily of background interest as a case study of a comprehensive community arts approach to community building.

2.4 Conclusions from the literature review

In considering the extensive literature on community participation and community information gathering, the metaphor of a funnel comes to mind. A website or text on promoting community participation is often – quite rightly – multifaceted, and the methodological resources themselves (i.e. tool kits, method prescriptions and other recipes) are typically only one part of this.

The tools or methods are often well described, but a significant narrowing of the funnel occurs when one applies the evaluation criteria of *consideration of context***,** *implementation* and *follow-up*. This is understandable, as these are the aspects that require the most experience to understand. For example, significant judgement is required on the part of the community worker to assess whether a community is ready to engage meaningfully with a particular method of information seeking.

The greatest constriction of the funnel occurs, however, when we search the literature for explicit discussion of how useful particular tools are for *community building***.** This aspect was significantly underdeveloped throughout the presentations of different techniques.

In the literature reviewed, the presentation of the tools was invariably separated from even brief discussions of *actual community applications* which could have helped to illustrate the points made, such as the strengths or weaknesses of a method. While there is an extensive academic literature on the application of techniques in particular projects, the lessons from these projects remain buried in journal articles or in lengthy case study sections on a website. What is needed are links from each tool to short, reflective sections that present some 'lessons from the real world', illustrating and evaluating successful and unsuccessful applications of different tools.

A unique contribution can be made if the CBRS website or hard copy resource on tools for gathering information in community building work contains a discussion, for each tool, of the last four criteria applied in this literature review. Such a discussion will be made even more meaningful if specific examples are provided to illustrate the various aspects.

3. IN THE FIELD

3.1 Background

3.1.1 Selection of projects and interviewees

For the field work, projects were identified in conjunction with the Office of Community Building and through input from government program managers. We attended a forum for department program managers, which led to the inclusion of some managers in the interviews. These consultations also helped us to engage community projects. A list of potential projects was compiled, along with the names of relevant project managers. When people were contacted and invited to participate, they were also asked to name relevant staff to include in the interview.

The field work included project workers from:

- all ten community building demonstration projects funded by the Office of Community Building;
- four Community Capacity Building Initiative (CCBI) projects;
- one local council project; and
- one rural project run by a non-government organisation.

Consultations and interviews were also held with program managers from Neighbourhood Renewal, CCBI and Disability Services. In total, 29 people (program managers and people working on 17 projects) were interviewed in 21 individual interviews and 5 focus groups. The names of interviewees and projects are listed in Appendix 1.

The primary aim in talking to people involved in the demonstration projects was to capture their learning about the information gathering processes they used within the communities. Other projects were included because they:

- captured cultural and linguistic diversity;
- engaged disadvantaged communities;
- worked in rural and regional areas;
- were identified as using innovative practice;
- used a range of media, including image; and/or

- were interested in participating in the review.

In addition, as part of the consultation process, a focus group was run at the Darebin forum with members of the community building demonstration projects.

3.1.2 Engaging participants

We took considerable time to develop a relationship with the community project workers. This process of engagement is important because our findings strongly reflect aspects of trust, relationship building and respect. While many project workers and managers were willing to participate, they all expressed difficulty in managing this request along with the many other things they were being asked to do at that time. This called for a sensitive approach in terms of flexibility to arrange interviews that fitted with their busy schedules.

It became apparent that it would be respectful, as well as in keeping with the community building best practice concept (building trust, relationships and respect), for all participants to be interviewed face-to-face, regardless of location. The benefit of this approach is highlighted in the following two quotes from participants:

> I enjoyed the experience and feel immediately a part of this project… This would not have happened without the interview – it's inclusive and personal…

> …there was a living, breathing person in front of me. I think I would have been much more guarded over the phone. …sitting with me and listening to my story over the table – about this project. I think that it allows much greater honesty and reflection… It is very powerful to have someone willingly sit with you and listen…

3.1.3 Interviews

All interviews were held *at the project sites* around Victoria.[2] Interview questions were based around aspects of participants' experiences in gathering information from their communities. Questions included:

- How were information-gathering tools chosen?

[2] Project workers and managers voluntarily consented to participate in the interviews and understood that they could withdraw at any time and that this would no jeopardise them in any way. The Human Research Ethics Committee at Victoria University approved the project.

- What were the benefits/costs in using them?
- What was learned through the process?
- What didn't work so well? (This question yielded limited information.)
- Considering the project aims, what other methods could have been used, and what prevented the use of other methods that might have been considered?

The interviews took place in conversation style, giving participants the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and reflect on their experiences. In this way they could explore and identify aspects of their engagement with their communities in a medium that could provide rich detail and insight.

3.1.4 Presentation of findings

In the next section, we list the main tools and strategies employed by workers in community building projects to gather information. While it is not an exhaustive account of methods used within projects, it covers the major methods workers selected to discuss in the interviews.

The information gathering methods mentioned by workers vary greatly in their level of formality. Many of the community building workers reported very informal methods:

> The main method for me was to go out and simply talk to people in the communities. I did that through a list from local government and my own knowledge of who the community leaders were. And [it is important] to be aware that they are not always the only community leaders – it is through word of mouth [you go about] working out who is a community leader.

It is worth noting that in the view of some community workers, the idea of a set of tools for information gathering is artificial. They see themselves as engaged in a process of working for the community, rather than in tasks such as generating information.

> INTERVIEWER: What are you calling this particular method?
> RESPONDENT: I don't know. I don't really tend to give them names, because it's just a process. It's about empowering and teaching and getting the best result for the community. And not being an academic or going through formal training to do this sort of job. It has always been: what is the most practical common-sense thing to do to achieve the result?

Furthermore, no project used just one method. The list of methods may give an overly linear impression of the way information was gathered. In practice, the methods were used in conjunction with one another. One method may grow from another, or they may be used in tandem. For example, a community working group is small by nature; the voices of other people in the community may be heard by holding a wider forum or meeting. And asset mapping may be an intended spin-off from other methods, such as holding a forum. The listing of methods in section 3.2 should convey the range of different methods used.

3.1.5 Tools and frequency of use

Table 3.1 gives an overview of the methods according to how frequently they were used by the respondents.

Consistent use **More than 12 projects**	**Advertising and invitations** **Beat the feet** **Community history audit** **Table talk** **Key people as informants**
Frequent use **8–12 projects**	**Questionnaire with qualitative section** **Conversations with existing networks** **Employing consultants** **Social events** **Open days / drop-in**
Moderate use **4–8 projects**	**Training volunteers** **Asset mapping** **Community meetings** **Story telling** **Working groups / citizen committees** **Workshops**
Infrequent use **1–4 projects**	**Coffee cart / sausage sizzle** **Listening post** **Community worker brainstorm** **Interactive TV** **Focus groups** **Speak-out** **Forum** **Link lunches** **Telephone tree / teleconference** **Video**

Table 3.1 Tools and frequency of use

3.2 Specific tools

This section provides an alphabetical overview of the 26 main tools and strategies employed by workers in community building projects to gather information.

3.2.1 Advertising and invitations

People respond better to personal targeted invitations than to general advertising. *Targeted invitations* were used to invite selected community members – or relevant agencies – to attend meetings with community workers and have their say about issues and visions that pertained to their community.

> Invitations were quite broad to the communities and to the key community centres and neighbourhood houses and education. It was in Lakes Entrance and between 80 and 100 people came to the first meeting, which is a very good turnout for such a big region.

General advertising, such as fliers, community notices and newspaper ads, was used to target the wider community to advertise events such as community workshops and social events, or to invite people to become involved in the local community building initiatives. This form of advertising seemed to have an effect for larger events but was not useful when attempting to engage people in table talk, or in volunteer activities such as working groups:

> We hand-delivered 1500 fliers and we targeted areas of high level of public housing to try and make sure that we were targeting the disadvantaged. Two people called but they didn't end up… following through…There was an article in the paper about that too.

> There was an ad put into the whole area but there was not a lot of response. It was more… the *word of mouth* that worked for that exercise [working group].

Advertising was more successful when workers could identify target groups where it was more likely that material would be read, so the material was targeted to some extent.

> …getting out into the media and the school newsletters is probably one of the easiest and best avenues into the community as far as what people will read. Not everyone will buy a newspaper, but they generally read like the local school newsletter, community newsletter. I have used those regularly.

A better result was often achieved in conjunction with face-to-face or word-of-mouth strategies, particularly in communities where a low stage of readiness was evident. For example, reaching people in diverse cultural or marginalised audiences often meant establishing contacts and relationships with key people in those communities so that information could be disseminated. (See sections 3.2.12, 'Link Lunches'; 4.6.1, 'Recruitment of volunteers'; and 5.3.2, 'Doggies to Highpoint' case study.)

3.2.2 Asset mapping

Asset mapping is a way of producing an audit of services and community resources. This tool is discussed in detail in section 4.4.

The mapping of community assets happened in a variety of ways, depending on what sort of information communities required. Applications included:

- finding out the skills of community members so that people could ultimately be utilised within their communities;
- looking for gaps in service delivery;
- recognising assets to enhance local identity; and
- building a database of community resources for future use.

3.2.3 Beat the feet

'Beat the feet' involves actively going out in the community with the aim of meeting people in places where they already gather, such as the local shops, cafés, school grounds and supermarkets, or simply opportunistic liaisons (e.g. in the street). The purpose is to meet people from a cross-section of the community that might not otherwise be reached, to engage them in conversation about their thoughts about their community and to inform them about the community building initiative. In rural areas this could mean going to the pub.

> Go to the pubs and have a chat to them there…talk to them in a very natural setting and they will be receptive, or honest anyway.

The main strategy was to simply target domains where people congregate.

> …conversations we had with people informally… quite often that is where we got the best information. Just talking to some parents up at the school. People who were up there for a coffee, or hanging around the Neighbourhood Centre.

(See section 4.6.1, 'Recruitment of volunteers'.)

3.2.4 Coffee cart & sausage sizzle

A mobile coffee machine was used to travel through the back alleys of inner Melbourne and lure people out of their homes to meet each other. This was an innovative attempt to engage the large number of community residents that lived alone and were perhaps isolated or marginalised. While the prime purpose was simply to engage people and build trust, valuable information was shared in the process.

A sausage sizzle was used as part of a community speak-out where people were offered a free sausage if they shared their ideas and thoughts about their community.

> It was very successful and it was great. We met a whole bunch of people that we had never met before who had some fabulous ideas about things that they wanted to see happen in the community, and they are still working with us now. They not only told us what they want, but thought, 'Yeah, I'd really like to do this,' so they've come along and we met with them at some other stage and their ideas and aspirations were put into practice.

(See section 5.1.2, 'Finding out and building trust'.)

3.2.5 Community history audit

Workers gathered written information about their communities from past local government reports, past and current research about the community, other community projects and ABS data, to strengthen their knowledge about community readiness and possible approaches to their work.

It was important to find out what had been done in the past, what worked and what did not, and why:

> Our focus areas have a long history of community development projects… We didn't want to overlook the work that had already been done by existing groups in

> the community in terms of researching what people wanted and what were the strengths of the area… We were very conscious that we engage with and consult with existing groups… Because we've built up some trust, we asked if we could go back through some of their records and history about what were some of the pressing issues that had come up over time… We grew to a shared understanding about the fact that the community wasn't a blank piece of paper, that it was already rich with life and other projects had been here before.

(See sections 5.1.2, 'Finding out and building trust' and 5.2, 'Information gathering for sustainable community building'.)

3.2.6 Community meetings

Meetings were held with community members to present information about community building projects and to generate discussion about main issues within the respective communities.

The meetings served to identify ideas for projects and important issues, such as community celebrations, a focus on retaining young people, and improving transport, connections and services. However, many workers reported that this method was too formal and therefore not popular among community members.

> We have steered clear of saying we want to have a meeting. What we have tried to do is to… introduce a real sense of excitement or challenge to people… We had to think of ways that we could do things differently so that people might come, but also on the day be meaningful to them – so they weren't just sitting around listening to people and having a talking fest.

The main use of community meetings included agencies, community workers and partners. Community workers also attended meetings of local organisations such as Rotary, CFA, Traders Association and Lions Club, in order to get to know people and become known.

3.2.7 Community worker brainstorm

Brainstorming was used by workers within their own agencies, to open up issues that needed to be addressed and to achieve collaborative directions for community building processes. All possible ideas regarding the issue(s) were put up for consideration. Possible solutions and directions were discussed until an outcome was reached.

> We spent a great deal of time talking about what we were doing and why… Why were we doing it and what was our collective experience? What was our knowledge of the area and the people? … We listed and brainstormed every potential group of people that lived within our community, including people with different cultural backgrounds, disabilities, young people, old people, etcetera… and tried different strategies to engage those people.

3.2.8 Employing consultants

Consultants were employed to:

- train volunteers to interview people and run workshops;
- facilitate community meetings and workshops;
- analyse data collected from questionnaires or interviews.

It is important to find someone who has affinity or is familiar with the setting of the project:

> INTERVIEWER: With the facilitator, did you advertise?
> RESPONDENT: No. Again, it is [through] our contacts as much as anything that we were able to identify a person who was working in the field that involves young people…
>
> We believe that you have to have an affinity with it for it to be effective, particularly with young people, because if they see somebody coming in who is just doing a job, then they are not going to respond terribly well. Someone who has an affinity and a passion in the area, we believe, can have much better outcomes. If we hadn't known the person that we felt was suitable, we would have resorted to advertising…
>
> Similarly, with the evaluator, we were able to discuss the requirements with the university, and they came up with someone that we were very, very pleased to have on board. Again, this person had done her PhD in paediatrics and had a very strong empathy with young people and what the project might deliver.

> … the person I spoke to didn't have a full understanding of what was needed – what this Community Leadership Group needed. So the trainer who came in was very good, but had done most of his training in another industry.
>
> So, for example, in the first meeting, people were talking over each other. There were no rules established. We had interpreters there. The interpreters were talking to their people, people were getting agitated, there was too much noise in the room. It ended up … a fairly heated discussion because the trainer didn't understand how to use interpreters. What he was doing was talking very fast and not taking breath, and they had to keep up. They said: 'You have to do one of two things. Either say a sentence, stop and we will translate that, or you say you're going to convey an idea and there's a pause and we will convey that idea. But if you're talking and you're not taking breath, you're paying us and we have to translate everything'.

> So there was no understanding and people were getting agitated in the group. It raised concerns for me, trying to work with this group and this trainer who didn't understand what this group was about. Although he'd read literature on the project, he still didn't understand what his role was. He saw his role as educative, I suppose, but if you've got a trainer who works with community, they work totally differently. They work with images, pictures, fun, team building skills.

(See section 4.6.2, 'The training process'.)

3.2.9 Conversations with existing networks

Tapping existing networks and partnerships can be a beneficial practice in order to gather and disseminate information quickly. This tool is discussed in detail in section 4.3.

Conversations with existing networks were used to share information about the community building project with other community agencies and partnerships, and to find out which other projects were operating in the community. The purpose was to build and enhance links in order to achieve a collaborative approach.

3.2.10 Focus groups

Focus groups are formally constituted, structured groups of people brought together to address a specific issue within a fixed time frame and in accordance with clearly spelled out rules of procedure. [59]

Focus groups were organised to find out main issues of concern and to discuss how to address those issues. They included different sections of the community, such as young people, parents, youth agencies, welfare agencies, businesses and education representatives. The aims were twofold:

- to develop a profile on issues of concern; and
- to invite as many relevant sections of the community as possible to become involved and develop real solutions.

> The main tool we used was a series of focus group meetings with young people in and out of school and people with a vested interest in young people, such as employers, school communities and general organizations… It's so important to get the different points of view, the different perspectives. You might be talking

about the same issue, but one group might have a completely different view of an issue…

More importantly, from our point of view: it was to engage young people. To tell them about our project and tell them that we wanted them to be involved in what we put into our action plans, to challenge them to take up that level of involvement. And also to look for linkages with employers, youth service agencies, schools and young people; looking for the things we might be able to partner together.

The key elements that came out of the focus group meetings and our research, the main two areas of importance for young people, are education and employment.

Focus groups also occurred within workshops or a youth forum:

> There were opportunities within those camps for smaller groups to come together and discuss some areas and issues, like focus groups.

3.2.11 Forums

Forums have been described as a 'public problem-identification and problem-solving sessions'. They can include up to 40 people; typically there is a discussion leader or facilitator. [3]

The forum was utilised in two different ways. In the first approach, the forum consisted of community service providers. The aim was to:

- share information about current services;
- create networking opportunities;
- promote community building principles;
- develop understandings of the practical meanings of these principles within the community; and
- demonstrate service delivery gaps (already identified by workers via anecdotal evidence from community members).

Visual mapping was used to illustrate the last issue, and agencies broke into groups to discuss how they could solve problems. (See section 4.4.2, 'Asset mapping for specific outcomes'.)

In the second approach, the concept of the forum was adapted and used in a camp setting with young people. It was a weekend event, with a mixed program to suit young people, including presentations from community agencies, art and drama workshops as mediums of expression,

recreational activities, planning sessions and brainstorms on issues of concern and visions for change. This was an attempt to engage young people, hear their views and develop action plans to address their issues. (See section 5.3.2, 'East Gippsland' case study.)

3.2.12 Key people as informants

One of the most popular strategies was interviewing 'key' people in the community, such as perceived community leaders. The purposes of this method are accessing information about the community quickly and finding out names of other community members who might be useful to talk to. This tool is discussed in detail in section 4.1.

The interviews happened in a face-to-face manner, in order to get to know people and become known. Sometimes 'key' people were not the best people to talk to, and workers had to go around the usual contacts and learn by word of mouth who the 'movers and shakers' were.

3.2.13 Link lunches

Lunch meetings can be an effective way for project workers to come in contact with individuals who might otherwise be left out.

Firstly, project workers created a liaison with agencies to 'sell' the community building project to the staff. The community agency workers then approached clients who would normally be difficult to access – because of their isolated or marginalised position – and invited them to lunch in an informal setting at the community house. The intention was to tell those people about the project and find out their views and concerns about community issues. The method also served to engage new people in the community.

> We would provide link lunches where we would host a barbecue or lunch, and the agency workers and their clients would come for an excursion out to see us for the day. So it was fun and entertaining and it provided them with information… It also gave us the opportunity to ask them, as new people in the area, what they needed from their new community. Why did they leave the last one; what was it about the last one that they left for? What would make them stay?

3.2.14 Listening post

This method involved setting up a decorated stand in a high-traffic area, such as a community day or fair, shopping mall or other public space, and inviting people passing by to hear about the community project and to express their views and visions about community.

3.2.15 Open days & drop-in

Community building offices were used as drop-in centres for people to obtain information as well as to share their views on an ongoing basis. Specific open day events were also held, with the same aim. This approach was designed to be informal and interactive.

3.2.16 Questionnaire with qualitative section

Data were collected using simple tick sheet questionnaires that also contained a section eliciting qualitative comments. This technique was used within the context of other methods such as workshop, social event or forum. Community surveys (action research) were a more overt application of this method.

Results were analysed later by volunteers, partners (such as the university) or consultants. The keys to successful outcomes were simplicity in design and finding a way to engage people.

> Both the questionnaire we asked them to fill out at the beginning [of the youth camp] – and the VET students developed these questionnaires with our support – and a questionnaire they filled out at the end… They all got a lollipop to suck on while they filled out their questionnaire. Every person… did fill it out and we got some good responses from that.

One aim of the use of questionnaires was to gather information that would ultimately be useful in identifying barriers to participation and in learning how to assist people to become involved.

> People were invited to say how they would like to be part of the project and what they needed assistance with, such as barriers like transport, language. What skills and resources could they lend to it and how we could contact them and further comments? That gave us a bit of information about the attendees.

3.2.17 Social events

Project workers frequently developed or facilitated activities or events that would engage a broad range of people in the community – or specific groups – so they could have fun, learn about the community development project, and contribute their views. Movie nights, parties in public spaces (such as parks), family festivals and community dinners are some examples of this method.

> The choice of speakers had a huge impact on the atmosphere and the levelling that happened for that day. They were inspiring but also very humble people.

> The model that was adopted, 'Party in the Park', was how to do community building without running a meeting or a forum or a seminar… It was run by one of the action groups of the project, our Series Action Group. Their purpose was to have a celebration of the community and to connect the community through the Arts, using the Arts as the medium. On the basis that everyone has some creativity in them and that the Arts are really broad… But it was also about networking the community to get them involved and make a contribution to the day.

3.2.18 Speak-out

The speak-out method provides people with an opportunity to express their point of view. A venue for this is set up either stand-alone or as part of another event.

The technique was used with young people in conjunction with a drumming performance at a community festival. This was an opportunity for the voice of young people to be heard in a public domain. Other applications involved community workers engaging with the public at community events such as a local fair.

3.2.19 Story telling

People from the community were encouraged to share stories about their lives and experiences of their community. This tool is discussed in detail in section 4.5.

This technique was used to:

- generate ownership of both the past and future;
- build connections and trust; and to
- raise the level of community resonance and readiness to move forward.

Workers described the stories provided by members of the community as 'rich information steeped in history'. Although many workers did not recognise this method as a tool for community building, it was reported to be a powerful way to connect people and build relationships.

3.2.20 Table talk

Small groups of people would often gather around a table (kitchen table, pub table or coffee table) to talk about issues and concerns regarding their community. This occurred as a strategy planned by workers, or by community members inviting the worker along to a group meeting they had arranged. This tool is discussed in detail in section 4.2.

The main feature of this technique was the rich information that was shared, due to the informal atmosphere in which people were more likely to open up and express their views. Women were more likely to meet at the kitchen table in their homes, while men tended to meet at the pub or coffee table settings. In many cases a snowball effect happened, where names of other people were provided and more table talk meetings were set up.

3.2.21 Telephone tree & telephone conference

Workers set up networks with community members or colleagues to communicate information. In a telephone tree, a link is made with one community member, who passes the information on to two designated persons on the telephone tree list. Those persons then each pass the information on to one or two other designated contacts, and so on, until all people in the tree are contacted.

This method saved project workers time by spreading the load of delivering and gathering information, and kept up personal contact at the same time. Teleconferences by phone were also a useful way of communicating, particularly in rural settings, for the same reasons.

The tree model was also used in order to get in contact with project participants:

> I would ask the councillor of that area who were the key people in the community that I should talk to about what issues were affecting the community, and they

would refer me to two or three people. I would ring those people and then they would mention other people, so a little bit of a tree began.

I'd end up with about eight to ten people in each town, and then I would be meeting with them in the pub, maybe, once a month, just to talk to them about issues – and now we are at the stage where we are looking at a community action plan. From that process they regularly ring me, or email me or whatever, to talk about issues and how they can focus on those issues and resolve them.

3.2.22 Training volunteers to gather information

Volunteers from the community were trained to interview people, run workshops and conduct surveys. This tool is discussed in detail in section 4.6.

In some cases, this method was used in order to collect information from groups of people – such as marginalised groups – that would otherwise be difficult to access. Other reasons included improving capacity among participant volunteers, and establishing networks for information to travel back and forth in a sustainable way.

Substantial commitment was required from volunteers and workers. Often community workers had to invest a lot of time and were required to monitor the training process and to provide ongoing support to volunteers.

3.2.23 Video

In one project, video was used to capture the history of a community via interviews with the elderly residents. A script was developed and material was edited to produce a video that was then shown to the community. Young people were involved in the project alongside adult volunteers from the Historic Society. The intended outcomes included:

- valuing the voice of elderly people;
- capturing important aspects of history; and
- involving young people in the process, to both learn about their community and develop skills in video production.

Another project made use of video and other expressive media to evaluate a forum attended by young people.

> The VET class also conducted video interviews with the people who were attending the weekend, and they also set up an evaluation process where you could paint the weekend on a big canvas they set up. The young people did this pretty amazing painting. That was in case people didn't want to be in the video, or talk, or weren't very self-expressive writing stuff down…
>
> 'Hopes and dreams' was the theme. It came out of the whole weekend, what the issues were, and was a way of evaluating the success of the weekend and getting feedback from the young people who attended. The visual one was more a way to express what you were thinking and feeling. It was another way to get information about the hopes and dreams of young people living in East Gippsland. It was a lovely way to look at it.

See also section 4.5, 'Story telling'.

3.2.24 Video conferencing

Video conferencing was tried in rural settings in order to connect people and share information. People were not familiar with communicating in this way, and the high cost posed some problems in making this method viable.

> We have trialled video conferencing, teleconferencing, which unfortunately has been too costly, but I think it is a great way to go… We have had to look at practical means of connecting them and avoiding the travel… I'm hoping to get more people to sit in the background, so they are not afraid of the video conferencing process… The only way to overcome that is to just keep doing it.

3.2.25 Working groups & citizen committees

In some cases, more formal structured groups were formed with members of the community. The aim of the groups was to provide an opportunity for people to:

- learn about their communities and community building;
- develop networks among themselves;
- discuss community issues; and
- plan suitable action to address those issues.

> The informal working group is a tool to empower people to get what they need at their pace.

Workers had to facilitate the meetings. In order to build the capacity of those in the group, it was important that facilitation occurred in such a way that community members could move at their own pace according to their own skill levels and comfort. The working group members generally varied in level of skill and experience, so group facilitators needed to have skills in order to manage those differences and to promote capacity building opportunities. (See section 5.3, 'Community readiness to act', esp. 5.3.2, 'Doggies to Highpoint' case study.)

3.2.26 Workshops

The Community Capacity Building Projects all used workshops as a pre-planned strategy to work with the community. These were often large events that were planned and structured to maximize community involvement. In these facilitated workshops people would break into smaller groups to work on tasks, issues and solutions, and then negotiate outcomes in the larger group setting.

The method was used to bring community members together to talk about needs and visions for the future, as well as have fun. One demonstration project used the workshop technique with an art focus to generate meaningful interaction and a fun way of achieving that result: community members' messages and visions for the community were painted on life-sized 'people scapes' and paraded around the community to raise awareness and generate interest in community issues.

> We organised any sort of support for people [e.g. transport, childcare]. We also provided what we saw as excellent food for the day… We started out saying that we were not to just have meetings. We were going to have activities so that we develop this project, connecting people and getting information via new and different ways. The workshop was the beginning of this process.

3.3 The right tools for the right setting

The choice of tools for information gathering will always depend crucially on the circumstances and needs of a specific project. Many factors come into play, such as the aims of the project, the social and geographical circumstances, the expertise of the project workers and the level of education and autonomy of the participants.

Perhaps surprisingly, *gender* was identified as a factor influencing the way information could be accessed. For instance, conversations were likely to occur in different social domains for men and women. Depending on the gender of the information gatherer, many of those domains – or gender-specific networks – could not be accessed. A neutral space, such as the community worker's office, sometimes provided a solution.

Still, gender may need to be considered when planning information-gathering strategies in order to achieve the best representation. Kitchen table discussions, for example, were almost exclusively held with women in the setting of their homes, with female workers attending. A more public space was required to engage men in conversation.

> FEMALE WORKER IN RURAL SETTING: When I was in conversation with men it would tend to be at meetings… I didn't get stories, I got facts… They needed opportunities to engage with you at different levels… that one-on-one contact to reveal hidden things.
>
> Women would invite me into their house and we would talk over a cup of tea, but the men ended up coming to my office or ringing and giving information.

A male rural community worker gathered information in quite a different way. He described himself as wearing two hats, one as the community worker and the other as a local male with established community networks where he could 'hear local conversation'. This worker described his role as 'spreading tentacles out into the community everywhere'. This included making use of a social network available to him as a male, in social domains such as the local butcher shop, over drinks with local farmers in the barn or pub, in tradesmen's venues, the piggery, and at Rotary or trade meetings.

An over-reliance on gathering information from either male or female networks will affect what will be heard in local conversations, and this will ultimately influence the direction of community building action.

4. FOCUS ON SIX TOOLS

We will now take a closer look at six of the tools listed in the previous chapter, in order to give more explanation of some commonly used informal methods. Four of these – *key people as informants*, *table talk*, *conversations with existing networks* and *training volunteers to collect information* – were chosen because they were commonly used in the Victorian practices reviewed. *Story telling* was chosen because the interviews showed it was commonly used, but rarely presented by workers as a tool. *Asset mapping*, finally, is a more formal method. It has been included because it was reported as difficult by most project workers that tried it, and yet it addresses a potentially important aspect of community building.

4.1 Key people as informants

For the workers interviewed in this study, key people were often conduits for information. It was common practice to find out who the perceived leaders or key people in the community were: through contacts provided by council members, through word of mouth or by identifying lead groups and talking to the people involved in those groups.

Better information through key people

Utilising key people or perceived leaders was described as a starting point to gather information about the community and to find people who would be helpful in an ongoing way.

> Identifying some key people in each community, I found that very useful. I have probably got one or two contacts in most of these communities that I have valued for the last two and a half years.

One group of workers, reflecting on their project work, found – with the benefit of hindsight – that they could have engaged more successfully with their community using key informants. Faced with the challenges of a highly multicultural community, they learned that they needed the help of leaders from different groups to access various networks and engage people in their project.

> There is a number of community leaders representing different cultural groups… I think we could have been targeting community leaders a lot earlier… Maybe the school principal or a church leader, real identifiable leaders. Getting them on

> board would have made a big difference to our end result… because it was a bit cold calling in the end for us.

People are more likely to give high-quality information in situations in which they feel trust. Cold calling (talking to people without an introduction) is less likely to quickly result in high-quality information. Key people were often able to provide an 'entry' to a particular group, and in doing so provided some credibility to the community worker as a person to trust, and to community building as a process to trust.

Limitations of using key people

A number of community workers found that perceived leaders did not necessarily always take on a facilitating role:

> The biggest lesson I've learned is that who Council think are the key people in the community, are not the necessarily the best people to have involved… Those people were really controlling: 'This is the way it has to happen, end of story.'… A lot of people had been upset by working with those people… When I saw this happen I realized why particular things weren't working in the community.

Leadership style can be a destructive influence in the community, impacting upon participation and even community readiness. For instance, it became apparent that in some communities change was not welcome if it threatened the balance of power or the established leadership structure. In one case, energy in the community was depleted and it was difficult to muster any enthusiasm.

> We have been working really hard in a particular community for 18 months and we've totally failed. Everything we have tried to do has been a disaster.

Workers were also mindful of the problem that the views of key people were not necessarily representative of the community. Therefore it was necessary to go outside the usual leadership structure and find people who were involved at various levels and layers of participation in the community.

Furthermore, key people were often too busy and already committed, with little time to extend to new projects, so a different approach was needed to engage with the community.

> Partners or stakeholders that were sitting around this planning exercise had contacts into the community, had their own networks, and I as the community development worker was given these contact lists and then proceeded to make

those contacts. And what was interesting from that exercise was that the contacts I was given were fairly high profile, so they were very busy, not able to commit either themselves or other people into participating in this.

Identifying key people outside the usual structures was described by one worker as 'a process of discovery', which involved talking to people in the community, attending community meetings and visiting clubs and groups. The intention was not only to get a broader perspective on issues in the community, but also to identify where the energy was. This aspect required skill on the part of the community worker, both in identifying local champions and in building relationships with them so that their energy could be given the opportunity to flourish.

Identifying key people happened in a climate of support, collaboration and the *sharing of power*. According to community workers, many people were not comfortable with the term 'leader' and did not wish to be identified as one. The term seemed to conjure images of 'expectations to lead the way', 'this weight on their shoulders' or that 'they have a lot of power'. One worker reported that the community champions who were offered leadership training were actually insulted: '…people have said, "We don't need it." They feel that they are doing a reasonably good job as it is.'

4.2 Table talk

From our original understanding of the Victorian community building project work, we expected the 'kitchen table method' to be one of the tools this project would look at more closely. While project workers did report using the method, a closer reading showed that although they met informally around a table to talk, it was not usually a kitchen table. We have therefore renamed this tool 'table talk', to reflect the use of discussion around a table in general. Five projects reported use of this method (Pyrenees, Ballan, Dandenong, Geelong and Doggies to Highpoint). However, there was a great variety in what this actually meant across the projects, as the tool was adapted for use in different situations.

What's in a name?

Some projects reported that they used the method but didn't use the name 'kitchen table method', since they felt the name implied a gender bias (relating more to women than men). For instance, Doggies to Highpoint changed the name to 'talk time'.

The words ‘kitchen table’ also implied inviting people into one’s home. Not everyone was comfortable with using their home this way. Furthermore, some table talk groups involved people not previously known to one another, and participants did not want to have strangers in their homes. Tables in informal public spaces such as cafes and pubs were used instead. Pubs were important in small rural towns where little other public space was available.

> Yeah, kitchen table, coffee house. It just tends to be in the pubs because most of these towns are so small. If there is a general store, there is definitely a pub in most towns, and there may not be a hall that is available for them to meet in. But the pub is usually the thing that is open in the evenings.
>
> The other thing is that you have to be really flexible in when you meet. My meetings tend to be at 8 pm at whatever community because that is when women normally have their kids into bed. They’ve fed the kids and put them to bed and then the partner or husband can take over that role.

However, some projects did use kitchen tables.

> In this particular community, a few people got quite inspired about what other communities had done and contacted me... They said: ‘I’ve got together three or four people at my house; come over and talk to us.’

> We had kitchen table conferences with people I knew and had worked with and am still friends with. We ran by them some of the concepts we were employed to explore. We talked about community building principles and what we needed to do. That stimulated them talking about what they saw as the future and the strengths of the area… It was: a couple of people might get together and bring in some neighbours and we’d talk to them… We probably had four or five different types of kitchen table conferences where people brought their family or their neighbours. We would bring afternoon tea, which was a key ingredient in the kitchen table conference.

The strength of informality

One of the strengths of talking around a familiar table is that it provides a non-threatening talking place and style. This method has worked well to access people whose voice is marginalised.

The kitchen table method originally came from work with women. The idea was to build on perceived strengths that many women already had, such as skills in facilitating group discussion, and to build on natural networks that many women were part of. It was the formalising of a naturalistic method for sharing views. Projects have taken the spirit of this

meeting of people in places that are familiar to them and adapted it to use in the small rural town pub. However, in some communities groups were targeted due to their isolation. Since they therefore did not have a wide network, the model was adapted to suit this experience. For example, the Doggies to Highpoint project trained people to use this method with others they didn't already know. (See section 4.6, 'Training volunteers to collect information'.) The model worked well in this way.

While the informality of the kitchen table method is part of its strength, the need to record the information can be a weakness. The facilitator may record the themes of the discussion and feed them back to the community worker or community leader. One project used a qualitative survey in conjunction with table talk. In other cases the action was developed and carried out without recording, since the method formed part of a range of methods in developing action. Sometimes what has been referred to as table talk might well be called a working group, as the same group continues to meet and develop agendas and action plans.

Table talk can be used in developing agendas, as people develop views while they talk with one another. The same also applies to focus groups and working groups. The Geelong project used kitchen table conversations to engage people, gather information and develop agendas (see the case study in section 5.3.2).

One project advertised kitchen table discussions and hand-delivered 1500 invitations, but had virtually no response. This example shows that this method is best organised through personal engagement and word of mouth.

4.3 Conversations with existing networks

Tapping existing networks was a beneficial practice for workers in order to gather and disseminate information quickly. This method worked well in communities where sufficient networks had been established, such as communities that had been supported by community building programs over a long period of time.

> We are working with 60 projects per year at the moment, and each of those has their own network of sorts. Many of them cross over, but there is an extensive number of people out there who will help us in providing us with information about what is going on in their real life experience.

Some networks provided long-term links, such as reference groups for the elderly or young people, whereas other networks were short-term and formed due to particular issues at the time.

Drawing on work already done

A major benefit in well-connected communities was the opportunity for community workers to work in a collaborative fashion with other projects, partners, agencies and services, so that a unified approach could be taken. For instance, community workers in Geelong knew that in the particular area targeted for community building, a number of projects were already happening and others were due to begin.

> It's important to acknowledge that the links, networks and partnerships at a structural level were all firmed up prior to the project starting, so that people involved in the auspicating and management of those projects could work together and join up on how they were going to deliver those projects. The Communities in Action Partnership came from that.

The workers in this project were very conscious of being anthropological in their approach: they did not want to make judgements about what might be needed. Rather, they genuinely wanted to get a feel for community life in the widest possible way. This meant tapping into existing leadership groups, such as the Neighbourhood House, Community Management and the local Consultative Forum, to explore research that had already been done regarding community strengths and what people wanted.

Securing varied input

Often there are numerous existing networks that workers can tap into.

> A lot of the networks we are working with are predominantly service-provider networks, but we also try to build in community residents: [we want] service providers – meaning health and welfare workers, and not exclusively public service – but also trainers and businesspeople and residents and police on our committees... The networks we deal with are the tip of the iceberg and the ones that relate directly to our work. There are lots of others doing autonomous work in lots of different ways.

Strong connections with a variety of partners proved to be an invaluable resource for community building. This was evident in the development of young people's well-being in Shepparton.

We do have a Junior Council and we have good linkages with our secondary colleges, and they are one of the strongest allies in this whole community building process, the secondary colleges… a wonderful relationship with the principals. Two of the three in particular are very strong advocates of the school having a greater role within the community and that has been very, very powerful in our project.

We have a very good rapport with the Youth Service Agencies, with the secondary colleges and with employers, so it was quite easy for us to go to them and say, 'This is what we want to do. We would like your involvement,' and they were very keen players.

I think it came back to the networks that we already had through local government, that we were able to talk to those people and they were very willing to participate when we gave them a brief overview of the project. Again it's reinforcing that if you haven't got that networking and credibility and this type of interaction, then it will be very, very difficult.

4.3.1 Bringing networks together

In situations where there are good existing networks, bringing these together is a successful way of connecting the whole community, even when some turbulence is expected. As an information-gathering method, conversations between networks provide the information directly to those who are going to use it – the networks – rather than leaving it with the worker to disseminate later. As a result, this tool is more likely to go hand in hand with action planning than other methods.

An example of networks brought together successfully

In the Central Goldfields, workers sought a model of engagement and information gathering that could build community without meetings, forums or seminars. Informal group discussions were advertised using various people's networks, and a number of action working groups were subsequently formed from these. The groups included community members and volunteers. One of the groups decided to have a community celebration called 'Party in the Park'. The intention was to connect community using Arts as the medium, on the premise that everyone had something to offer and could participate in some way. People were also asked to fill in a page answering four questions about their vision for Arts in the Central Goldfields.

Different networks were brought together to work alongside each other for the first time, which meant that people had to talk to each other. This led to the development of new understandings, stronger networks and improved capacity.

> We had the photographic group and different artists and a whole cross-section of the community that had never worked together before, working together. It was about that information too and a model that would give you that result… They sorted out some differences on the day, which was really interesting, and now they are actually working together. A major outcome, really.

The expected outcome of the project was that a group would get together and in a grassroots approach develop an Arts and Cultural Development Policy for the Shire, and then develop that in collaboration with the Council. The communication between networks and the sharing of information about conflict and expectations – a spirit of 'Let's air our dirty linen and get on with it,' – developed as a spin-off.

> My feeling from being there on the day was that this stuff had been simmering around for a fair while… [People] said 'We always thought your group was about this,' and 'No, that's not the case at all.'

By communicating participants were able to strengthen their networks within the community, sometimes to their own surprise.

> In the Arts Action Group you have a whole heap of different artists from different mediums that are working together in a way that they have never worked together before. They quite commonly say in their meetings that they are amazed at how well they can work together…
>
> There were some local muso's playing, and the person who provided the local entertainment was there and said, 'I'd like to sign you up to come and play at weddings,' or little things like that...
>
> The photography group did a brochure for the Annual Flower Show in Melbourne as a result the day. Their work was on display and it was seen by someone who did the brochuring, and off they went.

The concept was so successful that it took off in other towns. Those towns had their own celebrations specific to their interests. For instance, one celebration was called 'Heart and Soul', which was also described as a great success.

4.4 Asset mapping

Asset mapping is a way of producing an audit of services and community resources. Four projects used asset mapping of some type, each using very different approaches. They ranged from informal attempts (where asset mapping was secondary, a spin-off from community

engagement practices) to more formal endeavours that were planned with specific outcomes in mind. The 'assets' being mapped ranged from services provided to people and skills.

Main focus or sideline

In the Dandenong demonstration project, it became apparent that finding out what the members of this highly multicultural community *could contribute* and what they *wanted* were both key issues. Therefore, volunteers were trained to run workshops to gather information about the skills and visions of community members. The objective was to identify the skills of residents and develop a skills-based community resource audit, so that those skills could be mobilised in the community.

In Warrnambool, a formal application was undertaken in response to an identified gap in service delivery. A forum with service delivery agencies and community members was organised to demonstrate and address the issue.

In the projects in Ballan and Ouyen, informal asset mapping was used in the context of initial community meetings. It was considered a good starting point, allowing people to take stock of what they actually have in their communities before working on further community building. The method also constituted an intervention, as the purpose was to both enhance the identity of communities and stimulate visions for growth.

In the Central Goldfields, the gathering of asset-based information was considered a second priority. The primary aim was to engage the community and connect it via participation in projects that were of interest to the members. The workers did not want to be jeopardise participation in favour of producing an asset map.

An exercise in optimism

The rural projects based at Ballan and Ouyen involved communities with histories that included hardship endured from drought, unemployment and other issues, and there was a tendency for community members to lose sight of the assets they did have. A way to encourage thinking away from a deficit or victim approach was to engage people from the outset in asset-based exercises that created vision and mobilised empowerment. Creating lists of their particular resources, even if it was the fresh air they breathed, was described as a very powerful exercise in optimism.

> They were dumbfounded, because they didn't think they had anything… It just blew them away.

A common experience of these workers was the need to prompt community members to think more laterally about their resources. For instance, the question 'What do you have?' was reversed to, 'What would you miss if it were taken away?' This yielded responses attaching value to services such as the local school, tennis court and recreation areas.

While the purpose of the exercise was to establish community assets and services, this process also led people into envisioning how they wanted their community to be, what else they would like to see happen, and how they could go about creating that change and growth. The process was described as an integral part of strengthening the identity of the communities as well as a stepping stone toward the planning of action.

In all cases of asset mapping, community building was enhanced in tandem with the documenting of assets. The closer analysis of different approaches in the following sections reflects the vastly different needs and stages of readiness within the communities.

4.4.1 Informal asset mapping

In Maryborough in the Central Goldfields, experience had shown that people did not respond well to high levels of formality. For instance, there was plenty of anecdotal evidence in terms of reactions to surveys:

> 'No, not another survey. We are all surveyed out. Whatever you do, don't survey us.'

Workers sought a more grassroots approach that could provide asset-based information along the way, in conjunction with community events that were more in keeping with the needs of the community and did not jeopardise engagement.

> Asset mapping is a bit of a buzz thing… It is easy to say, but if you break it down when you work with members of the community and work on something, what would that mean?… It's not going to people and saying: 'You're an asset and what you contribute to the community is an asset. Can we collect this information?'… It hasn't been: 'Here is a survey; we want to find out about you.' It's been done in an informal way… There are more creative and flexible ways to develop.

Information about community assets and services was generated through the involvement of people, groups, clubs, organisations and businesses that participated in community projects. One of these projects was a mini grant scheme, where groups could apply for a $500 grant to undertake a small project that related to 'connecting communities in the Central Goldfields'. This was a major success. After a number of projects were completed, the newly formed community action group decided to have a small book published illustrating what the grant recipients had done. This booklet, which celebrates the accomplishments of the grant recipients in pictorial and story-telling form, has subsequently been disseminated in the community, so that everyone could share the information and become inspired. Other projects undertaken included the aforementioned 'Party in the Park', using arts as the medium, and the development of a community website to link groups in the community with commercial and business interests.

Asset-based information was compiled as the project engaged with community members, businesses and government. By noting involvement and being mindful of 'asset information', project workers compiled information about skills, groups, businesses willing to participate, agencies and recreation spaces. The overall aim was to gather information from the community in a less academic way. The approach had to be conducive to engagement and the building of community at the grassroots level.

4.4.2 Asset mapping for specific outcomes

In both the demonstration projects in Dandenong and Warrnambool, taking stock of assets in the community was a main objective.

A multicultural audit

In the community involved in the Dandenong community building demonstration project, approximately 130 different nationalities were represented. Community workers felt that the people had many skills and strengths which were not being acknowledged in the paid sense, if at all. The specific aim of the project was to find out what people wanted for their community, rather than impose ideas upon them, and to match the skills people had with opportunities in the community where they could be used. Workers used asset mapping in the form of a 'community resource audit' to achieve that goal.

This approach involved the training of volunteers to gather information by going out into the community and running workshops with groups, as well as by undertaking individual interviews. Volunteers were English-speaking members of the community, representing some of the nationalities within it. This was an attempt to connect the diverse cultural mix and build networks within the community. The outcome was that data were obtained from approximately 300 people in the community who would otherwise have been difficult to access.

In keeping with community building aims, the workers were very mindful of not focussing on deficits and of portraying a positive concept.

> 'What are the positives that haven't yet been celebrated? What can you do for your community?'

While most of the information gathered pertained to people's likes and dislikes about the community, their visions and ideas about the future were paramount in deciding what projects would be established when the resource audit was completed. The intention was to match identified skills and talents with future projects, in the hope that people might become engaged in community building and enhance their own well-being.

> Just having a conversation about how to change things changes the way they perceive the community, and the way they perceive life.

Workers reported that volunteers developed many skills during the process. Many of them wanted to continue their involvement in future community projects. In this respect, capacity building was evident.

One aspect that did not work well was the term 'community resource audit'. It was not considered to be user friendly. Other terms such as 'skills bank' and 'strengths survey' were considered along the way, but the issue was not resolved: the workers claimed that they became stuck with it.

> 'Resource audit' sounded like a checking thing.

A service gap revealed and addressed

In Warrnambool, workers became aware that services were not evenly distributed across the community. This became apparent during consultations with residents in one particular neighbourhood.

> They can't get access to services, even though we have all these services that are funded to deliver there.

After confirming the paucity of services in that area, the community workers wanted to learn why this was so. They planned a service provider forum, inviting all services in Warrnambool. One of the main agendas at the forum was to map service delivery and demonstrate that there was a lack of coordination and communication between providers, which ultimately meant that the needs of the community were not being met. The forum was well advertised, both in written form and by word of mouth, and was subsequently well supported. Approximately 90% of service providers attended, including aged care, child and family services, disability, and many more.

A large whiteboard was utilised to literally map the areas in Warrnambool where those services were operating. Workers described the whiteboard technique as a successful ploy, because of the visual aspect. The gap between what was being delivered across the whole Warrnambool community and what was delivered in the target neighbourhood became evident.

> It was raw hard data there in front of people's eyes. It was hard to deny that something needed to happen. Everyone was slightly surprised by that gap.

The outcome was that a residents' group was formed to ensure that residents have a voice in the services provided to their community. Residents and service providers also formed the Service Delivery Reform Group to work toward change.

4.5 Story telling

For many community projects – notably those hoping to stimulate and engage community members to think, talk and work together – the simple strategy of telling and listening to each other's stories is a powerful tool. This method is familiar in almost all cultural contexts and requires no sophisticated language skills. It is also a common, powerful research tool when

used to capture rich descriptions of experience and practice so as to build an elaborate store of knowledge about a community and its members' lives.

When a group of people come together who do not know each other well, one of the most natural things is for them to commence with personal life snapshot stories. The stories lead them to identify things in their past and current experiences which connect them.

Overall, story telling has proved to be a relaxed and easy tool both to understand and apply. It has been applied successfully in projects in the early stages of engagement as well as in consolidated projects in which community members, the community worker and many of the methods are well established. In any environment, the naturalistic style of telling personal stories to others was a comfortable, non-threatening strategy. It yielded rich information and provided strong opportunities for relationship building and reflection as the basis for the development of informed community action plans.

4.5.1 Story telling for engagement

In the Doggies to Highpoint demonstration project, a significant number of the community members were newly arrived migrants from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

> …there was one woman, who was Somalian, who decided she would actually go to Highpoint, and so she actually canvassed strangers. And it was interesting because it was from her perspective that we learnt that there were no Halal butchers up there. These were the sorts of things that she would like. She met a couple of people up there and talked about how they felt walking through a shopping centre and what they like to do in a shopping centre.

> Essentially the project was working with about 8600 people in our precinct. Of those people, 65% are unemployed or transient or migrant refugees, and of those I think about 45% are non-English speaking… It took in people from different backgrounds – transient, homeless, elderly people from the high-rise and the general community.

Seeking stories from people in the community was a way for the project leaders to engage community members as well as to discover their needs. This was not an organised information gathering strategy in the project, but rather something that was naturally attractive to the community and which stimulated easy access to a wide range of people.

4.5.2 Story telling to illustrate possibilities

In the Ballan project, story telling was used in several distinctive ways. This strategy was of particular interest to the community worker, so there was a confidence in its application and usefulness. Firstly, it was used as a way to engage people and find out about their experiences, as in Doggies to Highpoint. The telling of stories by community members helped the worker to gather information about local experience and what was needed in the community. While people often told stories about negative things, this was seen as important, as it provided the opportunity to describe and label issues so they could be included in action planning.

Story telling was also used to illustrate what was possible: how other communities had started community building attempts and the sorts of things they had achieved. It was a powerful strategy used at kitchen table conversations and a great way to get conversation started. Existing stories from other people and communities were used as a way of introducing ideas, to enhanced confidence and empowerment within the community. Community members could see what was possible and draw ideas that were relevant to their community from the experience of others.

> I brought stories to them as a way to stimulate some conversation about their stories and their community. I would bring interesting and quirky case studies about communities that were very human and achievable. They weren't huge economic development projects that little communities wouldn't be interested in… One town did a photo of the whole town and that was something that got them all together and started them on a process of community building.

> It makes them think about what they could do, but also lets them tell you stories about what they have tried, and it opens the discussion for their story telling… I think they realized from sitting around that table… the information sharing triggered something… 'This isn't right. Our community needs to be connected.'

> …about respecting story telling as a way of gathering information… It shifts community to another level rather than talking… It resonates with communities… It's about connections and sharing and trust.

4.5.3 Story telling to preserve history and create identity

In the Lang Lang project, story telling was used in a more organised and deliberate way as a tool for gathering information and enriching community connectedness. Members of the local Historical Society were concerned that local history was disappearing. Papers and artefacts had been lost or destroyed due to bush fires, people moving away from the area and residents dying. The stories and memories of older residents were therefore seen as vital to the history of Lang Lang.

While the main goal of the project was to preserve the social fabric of the town, there was also a desire to reconnect with the sense of community spirit prior to the 1970s. The town had a reputation for being progressive and was considered to be the hub of the district since the 1890s, but from the 1970s onwards 'the town forgot it had to do something and basically went to sleep'. Business slumped, jobs were lost and services became depleted.

Under the banner of the Community Capacity Building Initiative project, members of the History Committee and the Youth Council joined forces to videotape older residents. Many elderly folk, who were born and raised in the town, were asked about life in Lang Lang when they were growing up. Most of them told stories of life from the 1920s to the 1950s. Some examples are:

> 'When I was young, we rode our pony five miles to school and we had three of us on the pony. We would put the pony in a yard opposite the school and then ride home again. We used to come into town on a Friday night and attend dances and other functions at the hall. The main street was full of shops then, and we could choose out of three butchers that operated in the town. There was a real sense of belonging and we all worked hard on the farms… The towns is different now, with a lot of the shops gone and more people working out of town, but I think the real character of the people is still there – but it is different.'

> 'When I was young, the 1956 Olympics were on and we used to bring a cushion and watch the games on TV in front of one of the shops. Many people came and watched, as this was one of the only televisions in town. The owner left the TV on so we could all watch; it was truly amazing.'

Apart from documenting the rich accounts of life during that time, the story telling also served to connect younger people and older people. Many young people did not have a lot to do with elderly residents and did not know what life was like a few decades ago.

> It was a fascinating process for the youth to work with the other people… It was a fabulous learning capacity for the youth… The end result was that they came out with some great videos and excellent dialogue on the history and social fabric. It was a bit of a history lesson, but it also showed youth what life was really like in the olden days… Old folk were rapt to be asked for their stories.

A shared identity

The stories provided the community with narrative that helped to shape personal identity, but they also developed a shared community narrative. The strategy enabled the community to 're-story', connect and talk about the future of Lang Lang. The general feeling was that although Lang Lang had changed from the bustle prior to the 1950s, the sentiment of the community hadn't really altered.

> It was still a very caring and sharing type of community, that was able to rise to the occasion when it needed to… People responded, they came back and worked like Trojans to get things done.

In this case, too, story telling was used to get communication going and applied in conjunction with asset mapping tools. Another aspect of the project was to create a walking track that included sites around the area, such as buildings and landmarks. One of the aims in collecting stories from the elderly people was to 'add meaning to the mortar'.

> It needs to be personal… It was about changing the thinking from… a pure factual to putting some interest in it. One of the sites is called 'Pa Cole's House'… and he was the first policeman in the town. His great-granddaughter was on this committee, because she saw that as a way of preserving some of that original history of the town.

4.5.4 Story telling for delivery of the action plan

In the Bass Coast project, story telling was used in a different but also effective way. The Mother Goose Program was a strategy to get young parents to communicate and spend time with their children. It encouraged links between relatively isolated parents, whose access might be limited due to lack of transport and other factors. This program encouraged the telling and sharing of children's stories, thereby nurturing parent–child relationships. This program was a response to the community action plan and it formed part of a well-developed larger community strategy.

4.6 Training volunteers to collect information

Community development workers chose to train community volunteers as information gatherers in four projects after careful consideration of the needs of their respective communities (Dandenong, Doggies to Highpoint, Port Phillip, and a Neighbourhood Renewal program in the northern suburbs of Melbourne). These communities, although all unique in their own way, shared the characteristics of:

- high multiculturalism;
- extensive unemployment; and
- marginalised groups of people.

It was evident to workers that there was a need to build the capacity of individuals and build connections at a grassroots level. Although one desired outcome was to improve the capacity of the community and produce sustainable outcomes, the major feature of this approach was to engage community members and stimulate interest. This reflects an early phase of low community readiness. A short description of each project's use of the method follows. The next sections will address specific aspects of the training of volunteers.

In the *Dandenong* community building demonstration project, workers were mindful that community members had a wealth of skills that were not fully recognised or utilised. A 'community resource audit' was chosen as the best way to develop a database of skills in order to match people with future community building initiatives, and to find out what people thought about their community (see section 4.4.2). A diverse group of 16 volunteers from the community was trained to run workshops and interview people from their own networks to gather required information. Data were obtained from 22 workshops and a number of individual interviews, which together involved 300 participants from the community.

At *Port Phillip Council*, a method was sought that could build networks among marginalised groups in the community such as drug users, sex workers, unemployed and rooming-house tenants. 50 peers representing those groups were trained as action researchers to collect information and establish links, so that communication could continue in an ongoing way. Each person was asked to interview 10 people, which provided 500 in-depth interviews for analysis.

One of the aims of the *Neighbourhood Renewal project in northern Melbourne* was to provide local data specific to community boundaries, so that issues and solutions – provided by community members – could be developed into local action plans. 40 volunteers, predominantly public-housing tenants, were trained to undertake a survey within their communities, which mostly involved door-knocking. 300 hundred surveys were completed.

In Maribyrnong, the *Doggies to Highpoint* community building demonstration project developed a working group. The working group, representative of this diverse multicultural community, was brought together to learn about a table talk method ('talk time'). Members then took that model back into their networks to find out what people wanted for their community. The 12 members of the community working group asked to each hold one talk time discussion with a group of 3–8 people. Engagement was the main focus.

4.6.1 Recruitment of volunteers

Advertising through local newspapers and fliers was widely used to recruit volunteers, but the response was minimal. Most of the volunteers came through word-of-mouth contact with existing networks, such as community residents' groups or working groups. However, workers also had to go outside those groups where links with networks were not established or to simply find people who were representative of the community. This 'beat the feet' method took time and persistence. In the Doggies to Highpoint project, the worker had to make her own connections with migrants and refugees.

> …where we had Sudanese people involved, I went through the church, and he referred to the project in his newsletter. He also let me come to an English tutorial class on Saturdays, where the whole family, children and adults, learn English. He let me talk to the tutors and to the parents. So, basically, anything I could think of – talking to Outreach Workers and trying to find people who were interested in their community.

For the projects to achieve successful outcomes, English skills were required, at least to a degree. It was apparent that in most cases the logistics of translation would be overwhelming, due to the extensive range of different cultural groups.

Volunteers ranged in age between 19 and 60 (across projects). It was difficult to engage young people between 18 and 24 years. The commitment asked of volunteers ranged between

4 and 12 months. In most projects, issues such as arranging family life, study, changes in availability of time and general life issues presented challenges that needed to be overcome. A stipend was offered to volunteers in all cases. This ranged from reimbursement for expenses, such as childcare and travel, to payment for doing research or attending meetings and training. One project also offered interviewees $20 to participate, to assure them that they were valued as suppositories of community data.

4.6.2 The training process

Group bonding was important in all projects. Sufficient time was needed for volunteers to 'find their feet' prior to the commencement of formal training. Four or five sessions were needed for participants to gain trust and confidence within the group and to understand the project and what was required of them.

> We were working with such a grassroots people who'd never been involved in something like this, never… You're asking a lot of people to come in and do this extraordinary exercise, and people are cynical and feel disenfranchised or don't have a voice. Trust is the most important thing…
>
> Or we would be meeting and she would be in Ramadan, so it was educative for some of those people to actually experience or ask directly why she wasn't eating… So it was really good and they came together as a group to support each other.

The length of time involved to train people was relatively short, but many modifications were often necessary to find the right level, so that people could understand what was being presented. In some instances interpreters were called upon in training sessions. Training (across projects) included group facilitation, interview skills, active listening, how to treat people, and issues of privacy and confidentiality. Training was acknowledged in at least two of the four projects by providing volunteers with certificates. In one case, training was accredited towards a community development course at university.

A major challenge for many project workers was finding suitable professionals with a community building background to train volunteers. In one case it took three rounds of advertising over a six-month period to find someone who could work with the varying skill levels of volunteers and the different abilities to speak English, and who could teach basic qualitative skills.

> It was a very long process that blew our whole time line out. It was a frustrating time and we lost some volunteers along the way because we couldn't find the trainer. It was a big learning for us.

In another instance a trainer was employed with a background in another industry, who was not familiar with training in the context of community building and had to be replaced because the group was not responding: in fact they were becoming 'agitated'. (See also section 3.2.8.) A suggested solution was to develop partnerships with tertiary institutions that are steeped in community building principles and practices, in order to develop a list of trainers with community building backgrounds for workers to access.

4.6.3 Post-training support

It proved valuable to have a person with the right skills to support volunteers and oversee the processes they were involved in: 'They needed that structure.'

The level of skills varied among volunteers. An effective practice was to match more highly skilled people with those that were less skilled. In many cases this simply meant developing enough confidence to 'look people in the eye'. In the community survey process, volunteers went in pairs to have support when door-knocking in the neighbourhood. In the Dandenong project, some volunteers were isolated and didn't know any groups of people to conduct a workshop. A worker therefore provided assistance. It was usual practice for another volunteer to go along for support and to be a scribe for the proceedings. A reference group member also attended, for extra support and to answer any questions if needed.

Debriefing was useful for volunteers. In the Doggies to Highpoint and Dandenong projects, regular catch-ups over dinner provided the opportunity for volunteers to share their experiences, which helped the bonding process. It was also an opportunity for volunteers to take control, be reflective, generate enthusiasm and table any concerns.

4.6.4 Particular challenges and solutions

It proved challenging to work with groups of people that were diverse in terms of skill levels, abilities with the English language, cultural backgrounds and life issues. Workers learned that the best results came from having an understanding of the community, developing a

relationship with volunteers, working at their pace, and adopting a flexible approach. It was also helpful for volunteers to have the assistance of translators when needed. The important element was to do everything possible to make volunteers' experiences positive and capacity-building. It was also imperative for the worker to be supported by the management structure.

Volunteers' availability fluctuated dramatically over the course of the projects, as their life circumstances changed. While this did create difficulties, the positive aspect was that the fall-off rate across projects was usually very low. The problem was most evident in the Dandenong project: at one stage there were not enough volunteers to cater for the demand of daytime workshops with community groups such as church groups, retired people and parents. The solution was to make sure at the next intake that enough volunteers were recruited and to designate volunteers to organise an availability roster to cover the day and evening.

In the Neighbourhood Renewal program, volunteers were reluctant to knock on peoples' doors because they didn't feel safe. Their neighbourhood was characterised by high crime rates and people were fearful of their neighbours. The solution was to test the reality of those fears, which may have built up over a long period of time. This resulted in a positive outcome where volunteers learned that there were 'other people just like them living behind those doors', which restored some confidence.

4.6.5 Positive outcomes: improved capacity

There was a wealth of evidence from all of these projects indicating that the capacity of volunteers improved due to their direct involvement in the projects and the training provided. Improvements reported across projects included:

- skill development;
- raised self-esteem and confidence;
- empowerment; and
- better social connections.

Volunteers also got to know their own backyard in that they discovered community facilities like the neighbourhood house, various community groups and numerous community leaders. Many moved into leadership groups or different roles in other projects, and some gained

employment as a direct result of being trained. For example, five people in the neighbourhood renewal program went on to work for Telstra conducting surveys.

There were also other notable benefits. For instance, the workshop process was described as a useful way for community members to identify with others. Through this group process, people began to recognise that they were doing things in their daily lives that required skills. They had not previously known that they had these skills. The fact that volunteers were facilitating those workshops meant that it was less threatening to attend and was better for engagement.

Dandenong workers produced a training manual that was developed and modified while they were working with the first round of volunteers. Basically, volunteers taught the workers what the kit needed to look like. The aim was to make the kit user-friendly, so volunteers could eventually train other members of the community. The result was a 'Train the Trainer' package, which is now a sustainable resource that can be utilised to train future volunteers.

> …this hasn't just been about collecting the information… this has been a long process and we have hit a lot of hurdles, but it has been a very rich and beneficial process. I think there is a lot of merit in doing this in terms of the richness of information that we have got out of it. The capacity of the volunteers that has built up along the way, and also the awareness through all those volunteers going out to community groups and people they know within their own network, informing them about [community] and that there is potential to change.

> I think investing a lot of time and resources into doing real consultation is critical, as opposed to tokenistic or superficial consultation which is often done. Generally people appreciate it when they have had a real chance to have a say and their say results in some sort of positive outcome. If that is done properly from the start, it tends to build from there.

5. EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

The choice of tools for information gathering depends on the context of the community concerned. In other words, it depends on the conditions in which the tool will be employed. The key questions the community builder faces are: what to ask and how to ask it. The interview data were analysed to develop further understanding of the context of information gathering in current Victorian community building practice.

5.1 Applying community building principles in information gathering

> It wasn't purely information gathering. We needed to offer more than just a chance to have a say.

In the projects, information gathering happened in conjunction with broader community building aims. The nature of the other aims being served by the same activities had an impact on the tools chosen and on how well they worked as information gathering methods. Here we discuss three main aims in relation to information gathering techniques; getting to know and getting known (or: finding out and connecting), finding out and building trust, and finding out while building agendas.

5.1.1 Getting to know and getting known

Methods may be ranked according to how formal they are (see section 5.2.2). More informal methods – such as beating the feet and table talk – were generally more useful in the stage of getting to know (information) while getting known (to people and in settings), while more formal methods – such as workshops, forums and working groups – were more useful in building agendas.

In all projects, information gathering happened in conjunction with engagement, the development of a social connection with the community. The efforts workers made to maintain the engagement developed through the information gathering process constituted an important link between information gathering and community building aims.

> …a couple of people might get together and bring in some neighbours and we'd talk to them. Some of those people came up with ideas for activities and projects that they would like to be involved in. We started working with them right at that point. Even though the point of that exercise was to gather information, we certainly didn't do it once off and leave people hanging if they wanted to get engaged or involved in any other activity.

5.1.2 Finding out and building trust

Group face-to-face information gathering techniques generally offered a better chance for capacity building of community members than individual one-on-one techniques, since in group-based methods the participants had the chance to meet others and make their own connections.

However, group techniques were more likely to raise the issue of sustainability of the community building program. Group members, more often than individuals, questioned the purpose of their input and asked to what end their information and time would be put. Communities reported disillusionment and cynicism due to previous involvement in government projects that did not lead to sustainable outcomes. When community members asked about the purpose of the information gathering, it was important that it be linked to sustainable outcomes.

> Yes, there has been a lot of research done in the two communities, and a lot of promises broken. A lot of expectations raised, and we were conscious of that… Playgrounds had been constructed and never maintained, and then torn down and taken away.

Questions of trust needed to be dealt with at a number of levels, sometimes by naming the issue.

> We… would say openly… we know that you don't have a great deal of trust, because of some of the things that had happened before.

In managing this challenge, it was important to link short-term outcomes ('quick wins') to the information gathering technique. One quick win was developed during information gathering in the Geelong project:

A quick win outcome from information gathering in Geelong

While we decided we were going to spend the first six months doing consultations, gathering info, we also wanted to use the opportunity for people to pursue or work though some of their ideas of what worked in the community. Some people had some fabulous ideas about things they wanted to do.

The very first group of women we spoke with were talking about the difficulties for new people moving into the area when they didn't have any money, family connections or social networks. They get into public housing and they feel revolting and don't want to meet their neighbours, feel disconnected and will probably leave. The group of women said, 'We can sew, if we have curtain materials, we can sew curtains for them.' We said, 'That's a great idea, let's get some money and start making some curtains.' That project has now evolved and works on its own through the Neighbourhood Centre. New Office of Housing tenants get a flier about the 'curtain connection' and they go out to the Neighbourhood Centre and get their house stocked out with brand new curtains and they get to meet local women, a tour of the centre, a cup of coffee and a friendly face.

The women can all sew and they get on quite well. Two of them knew each other and the rest met through other project work. When they go and sew, every Monday, they meet new people and they laugh and giggle. They have a small social club fund where they go out for lunch every six months. They also see each other socially and when there have been other activities they all come. It's broadened their social networks, and there are other ideas that group has now come up with. We are trying to create opportunities for that to happen. They now participate in Neighbourhood Renewal surveys where they get paid, increasing their work opportunities. They want to participate in the community enterprise initiatives that we haven't started yet, but will get off the ground this year. People… are often involved in a number of different projects. They will come up with new ideas.

Trust was also developed by increasing participants' familiarity with the information gathering method. This was important when new or unusual media were employed to gather information. For example, one rural project identified video conferencing as a potentially powerful tool, but found that time was needed for people to feel comfortable with this method:

> I'm hoping to get more people to sit in the background so they are not afraid of the video conferencing process. It's getting people to use it and feel comfortable with that type of process. Especially the first time they wouldn't contribute to the meeting, because they were so focused on how this was all happening. The only way to overcome that is to just keep doing it.

Another project, targeting isolated people, aimed to build engagement by using a mobile coffee machine. Again trust was an issue, in part due to the novelty of the idea. It was not what people expected.

> When we did have the mobile coffee machine, many people didn't come to it because they were worried that there was some hidden agenda with it, like a religious group, or we were trying to sell something. We had to spend a minute or two reassuring people who arrived that there were no catches and it was something just for them.

Finally, trust was established by community workers in their relationships with community members. In this respect, the continuity of community workers was an important factor underpinning the success of information gathering and community building. For example, engaging could include building credibility, through being seen working with others in the area:

> Eventually I found two people through word of mouth and just being seen on the Estate doing other social community issue projects – cooking classes and stuff like that. One of those people had great concerns that he was illiterate and felt uncomfortable about coming into the group, but we worked it out and he came on board.

5.1.3 Finding out while building agendas

Understanding the needs of the community often required project workers to engage with people and undertake project activities with tangible outcomes, in order to demonstrate the community building in practice. In the first instance some communities may state their needs in simple terms, such as the need for a drinking fountain in a park or a post box. As the engagement continues, the wider needs may be seen.

People may not bring more sensitive needs to the fore early in a relationship and the engagement process is necessary to obtain richer information. For example, in the Doggies to Highpoint project, what first appeared as a need for more activities in the high-rise turned out to be a serious issue about safety on the premises and equity in access to resources such as the community room:

> There are safety issues, but they don't say; they feel very uncomfortable using those words. So you need the research on the ground, but you also need the analysis and reflection of interpreting what's being asked.
>
> For example, at the high-rise: 'We would like some…' [inaudible] – 'Oh, that's easy, yeah, we organise a choir and put some music on,' but it's more. You unpackage that and it's about alcohol and behaviour in the community room. The women don't feel comfortable using that room. So it's a safety issue, but they don't say that. They will not be quoted saying that, because it all gets back and it's

not good. That sort of stuff. So it's understanding the community and working at their pace and supporting that voice.

Agendas build as people find their voice. Information gathering then must continue across the engagement process. For example, the issue of grief arose in one community as people shared their stories:

The power of story telling
(sent by a community worker)

We recently did a 'theatre of transformation' project in our community. This theatre method specifically uses story telling to write a theatre piece. In our case, the theatre director collected the stories of young people. These stories became the basis of a play, which they performed in three different communities. After the performance, the theatre director runs a workshop with the audience. He asks them about their reactions to the stories presented in the play. If people wish, they can ask to replay some scenes and 'launch' themselves into the play to try out different ways to change the outcome of these stories.

The theatre director also facilitated the most amazing dialogue in these workshops between the older audience members and the group of teenage actors. The responses from the audience to the play were completely different in each location. The first audience realised that as parents they needed to be more in touch with their teenage children. The second performance had some fabulous dialogue in response to issues of contraception and teenage pregnancy. It was quite amazing to see the communication between teenagers and older community people in a fairly conservative rural community focus on this issue.

The young people had been able to convey their stories in a very powerful manner without interruption from the oldies. There was such an air of respect in the audience for these young people, that it became very easy for these two groups to have genuine communication. The theatre director played a crucial role in facilitating these discussions. The following day a parent rang me of a teenager who had been to see the play. Her son had come home to say, 'The play was very controversial, and what would you do, mum, if I came home and told you my girlfriend was pregnant?' This had been a very difficult area to discuss with her son. She said, 'Thank you for opening up some difficult dialogue in our house.'

The third audience started their dialogue about homosexuality, and quickly moved on to the subject of loss and grief. It was quite a profound experience on this particular evening. After one woman in the audience alluded to some personal experiences with grief, the facilitator gently said to her, 'I can see that this is important to you.' The room became hushed and this woman obviously felt able to convey her story about the recent loss of her husband and the grief that she and her two teenage children were experiencing. This woman revealed her soul in this tiny Hall in this tiny town.

The facilitator then turned to the teenage actors and asked them about their experience of loss and grief. The scene had been set, and two young people told some of their own personal stories. One teenage boy talked of his grief about being adopted, and then the sadness he felt when his birth mother died. The facilitator asked him how he coped, and he shared how wonderful his adoptive parents were. The second actor, a girl in her mid teens,

shared how she had been depressed and the theatre project had been her way of dealing with her particular mental health issues. By this time audience members were crying.

But the communication didn't stop there. Afterwards the woman who had lost her husband talked to another lady who had a son who had recently acquired a brain injury. She shared her story of grief and loss. These two women had not previously got on. But somehow this evening had allowed them to express some of their most intimate stories, and they connected over their common experience of grief and loss.

These people are meeting again with the theatre director to design a community ritual on grief, where a number of people can express their loss in meaningful ways, share their experiences, rediscover hope and become part of a community that cares for those who are most vulnerable.

5.2 Information gathering for sustainable community building

All cases of community building investigated in this project presented an account of change. Each case is distinctive and its features cannot be reduced to a formula, but a pattern is evident within and across cases. The pattern is best termed a 'trajectory', a broad pathway which communities experience when they shift from little local connectedness and action to the building of local capacity, and ultimately to successful development of projects.

5.2.1 The trajectory of change

Successful information gathering is a social practice which results from the knowledgeable investigation of local settings by community workers and significant community members and agencies. Table 5.1 shows the *trajectory of change* by mapping the practices of information gathering against the specific features and issues of projects which have emerged from the analysis of the interviews. This chart is based on an analysis of those examples of information gathering which the interviewees perceived as successful in their own work.

The trajectory of change					
	Engaging and stimulating interest		Establishing techniques		Consolidation
Stage of information gathering	**Getting to know and getting known**	**Setting up for information gathering**	**Finding a focus**	**Formal information gathering**	**Moving to action**
Community indicators	Little community connectedness and action; marginalised groups not included. Failed community action, broken or unfulfilled promises may be evident.	Community groups (including informal groups) and networks exist and are accessible to project worker. Groups and workers become engaged and begin to be connected and comfortable with each other.	Community groups (including informal groups) and networks are confident in communication. Evidence of 'com-munity readiness'.	Groups, networks, agencies, local people and worker are willing to 'inquire' about a specific question or focus. Likelihood of successful outcomes!	Project or action becomes sustainable. Teams recognise that they are achieving outcomes.
Description of strategy	Project worker builds relations of *trust* over *time* through *conversations* about community interests, struggles and priorities.	Project worker undertakes more *focussed discussions* with community participants; is prepared to seek *alternative views*.	Accumulated conversations lead to *agreement* about a *focus* for action or development. *Resources* made available for information gathering.	Information gathering or strategy implemented on a specific topic. Basis is agreed for *action plan*, community plan or *project plan*.	Information gathering leads to *successful community planning*, *action* or *development*.
Typical methods	Informal conversations, table talk, street party, movie night, family festival. Story telling is a critical element.	Conversations (often organised by project worker) with specific groups in familiar settings – table talk – and at community events.	Focus or planning interest emerges from discussions and consultations. Thinking through how to involve community members/groups in information gathering.	Organised information gathering at meetings, forums, workshops and online; interviews, focus groups, surveys. Any 'methods' used are contextualised.[3]	Community teams become self-sustaining in working on a locally coordinated project.
Nature of information	Private experience	Personal narrative and history	Community narrative	Public information	Success in community building validates data and narratives.
Knowledge orientation	Anthropology / Action research				
Community participants	Especially important for marginalised groups or in areas with little community action and few community resources.	In conversations, community participants express interests and priorities and describe and explain struggles. Community leaders and dedicated teams emerge.	Iterations of focused discussions or consultations. Some show specific acts of leadership, moral commitment or risk taking. Establishment of teams or working groups comprising community members, groups and workers.	Active participation in or sanctioning of strategies. Information skills and capacity of community members enhanced. E.g. community members being 'trained' in interview processes; mentored leading of meetings.	Community members and groups take on project leadership; shift in responsibility from workers to community teams.
Role of community project worker and other professionals	Project worker seeks to make contacts with groups and listen to stories, to get to know personal and local histories about the community.	Networks established or contact made with existing groups and networks. Worker may bring groups together. Working teams develop. Worker acknowledges that local people have capacity!	Encouraging, training and/or advising local leaders. Coordinating participants. Organising advertising for formal stage.	Engaging external consultants. Liaison with other community workers, e.g. in local councils and OCB.	Shift to support roles. Move onto other focus areas in the community.

Table 5.1 The trajectory of change: moving to successful information gathering

[3] Methods are summative: informal methods as well as more formal methods are used across the trajectory. E.g. a questionnaire within an extended forum.

5.2.2 Formal and informal methods of information gathering

Methods of information gathering can be classified according to their level of formality. Although the tools presented in this report span a continuum, the more informal ones lend themselves better for certain settings and purposes and the more formal ones for other ones. However, tools can also be used in more or less formal ways. For example, story can be shared in a formal moderated setting and be recorded but they can also be elicited as part of an informal 'walking the beat'. The choice of tools and the formality with which they are used, will affect what information project workers can access and will have other consequences for community building as well. In the course of community building, there tends to be a shift towards more formal methods of information gathering.

Informal information gathering

A less formal method for information gathering is personal narrative or story telling (as discussed in section 4.5). Many workers reported making use of narrative, table talk and open days or drop-in. The use of these tools led to the development of trust between the paid workers and community members. That was an important achievement, essential for workers participating in community building with groups that were marginalised or at risk. Informal conversations with people in the neighbourhood and with community groups often helped workers to gain an understanding of people's priorities for action.

Informal information gathering requires community workers to adopt an active listening stance. In an informal discussion with community members, a community worker could for instance respond with: 'I hear you saying … to me. Is that correct?'

Community workers need to have access to local knowledge in order to initiate and support community building. To this aim, workers might be required to develop an '*anthropological* orientation' to information gathering. To participate, observe and gather information in the first instance. It is valuable for project workers to know their communities well. Often, certain information can only be gathered when members of the local community feel comfortable. Strategies used by community workers to enter

into the personalised and localised knowledge of the community included table talk and attending events such as community gatherings and movie nights.

Workers should be aware of the history of local communities. This involves respecting their past and, importantly, knowing what has worked in the past and what hasn't, and why. Local history can have its dark side, as one worker recounted, but this in turn can lead to understanding or commitment to a specific community issue.

> Some of those stories were quite disturbing at times and gave you an insight.

More formal information gathering

Once a project worker has gathered information informally about people's interests, struggles and priorities, this opens up the possibility for more formal information gathering. Workers, in collaboration with community members, set out to identify specific aspects about which information would be gathered. This process varied across projects. In this phase, workers used methods that were more targeted and focused to build on the initial impressions gained from listening to the community members' stories.

> The one that springs to mind is the Community Plan, which was established in 1999 through a process of consulting with over 1000 people… We had a process where we had 50 Neighbourhood Action Researchers who were employed and trained by the City… to interview people from their peer group.

Formal information gathering is distinguished from the informal processes by its *purposive focus* and by the *active engagement* of local community members, groups and agencies. In this phase there are deliberate attempts to simultaneously build the capacity of local people and gather information on which to base action. Communities and community workers applied formal strategies when there was some agreement about a particular course of action.

Project workers reported using a rich set of more formal information gathering processes, such as asset mapping, surveys conducted by community members after a period of training, community meetings, workshops, public meetings or forums, questionnaires and video interviews. While some of these approaches are normal

qualitative research methods, the way strategies were implemented – investigating the views of the community while also empowering and changing the dynamics of that community – gave them an *action research* orientation.

The table in section 5.2.1 shows the trajectory of change in a community building project. The role of the project worker changes as the project progresses: their knowledge orientation shifts from anthropological data gathering to action research. Simultaneously, the typical methods employed for (additional) information gathering shift towards more formal approaches – although informal information gathering methods occur and remain valuable throughout the project. Even in settings with active and successful community programs, workers should still maintain an open attitude: they may have to shift their attention to the stories of other, often marginalised groups.

5.3 Community readiness to act

Communities vary in their pre-existing social networks, previous community building activities and level of involved organisations. A map of these aspects of a community can help determine the level of community readiness for an intervention. (See Appendix 2, 'Community Readiness – Background to the Concept'.) The readiness of the community to take on and implement an action plan will affect the success of specific information gathering practices. The more ready a community is to act, the more prepared people will be to participate, to attend a meeting and to undertake actions in a self-determined way with minimal personal support from the project workers.

We have identified community readiness as an important factor influencing the success of information gathering strategies in community building. The level of readiness in part determines the way in which communities move to successful community building, and also determines what may be considered successful in a particular community.

5.3.1 Three stages of community readiness

Community building capacity and independence develop at a different pace and within a different time frame for each community. This evolution is partly determined by the community context and experience. We can identify three stages of community readiness for community building practice:

- the early phase – *engaging and stimulating interest* – in which networks need to be developed and there is not much contact yet in the community;
- the middle phase – *establishing* and developing an action plan – in which the community already has considerable networks and resources, which may be built on;
- the *consolidation* phase, when community building is underway and the community has some ownership of it.

These three stages are evident in the case studies presented in the next section: Doggies to Highpoint was still in the early, establishing phase when data were gathered for this report; East Gippsland was arguably in the establishment phase; and Geelong was entering the consolidation phase. It is important to note that each community moves through each stage in different ways. A community in which people do not have valid means of communication or even know each other will not be ready to easily take action for community strengthening. Often – as was initially the case in the Doggies to Highpoint case study – members are so pressed to meet their basic needs that engagement with and development of the wider community is irrelevant and inappropriate for them. Once the confidence of community members begins to emerge and they recognise that they have skills to offer and ideas to share, for the benefit of themselves, their families and others, they are ready to work with other members on a project.

5.3.2 Three case studies

Three demonstration projects have been selected to illustrate and contrast the concept of community readiness and the use of information gathering tools. They represent inner urban (*Doggies to Highpoint*), provincial city (*Geelong*) and rural and youth (*East Gippsland*) projects. Each project has its own distinctive features, yet there are common trends and learning about information tools used in community building

which can be gathered from the collective analysis (see the other sections in this chapter).

Engaging and stimulating interest: Doggies to Highpoint

The first case study, Doggies to Highpoint, illustrates:

- a project with an *inner urban* focus;
- the *early stages of development* of community readiness;
- a community *being stimulated to talk* and develop teams;
- *informal* information gathering strategies that are *highly supported by the community worker* and build confidence and trust for those involved;
- community workers who are *new to the role* in this community;
- a *multicultural community* with many newly arrived migrants.

The community, located around the high-rise flats in Maribyrnong, included many families with non-English speaking backgrounds. They had often newly arrived in Australia, many from the Horn of Africa. Their needs were high; cultural issues impacted the development of the community.

The information tools available to the community workers in Doggies to Highpoint needed to be adapted to respond to the needs of the community. Their model for information gathering and development was based on simply getting people together and talking. A community working group was established: its members were drawn from the broad community and were offered a small stipend to attend.

> …that working group needed to be reflective of the community. So it was diverse: it took in people from different backgrounds – transient, homeless, elderly people from the high-rise and the general community. So the Community Working Group had people on it that were illiterate and some that obviously didn't speak English and some that didn't like to move – physically – and were located in one area, like the high-rise, and didn't move around a lot.

Although all members of the community working group spoke some English, there was a need for translation of materials. Interpreters were often present to further support and build confidence and participation in the group meetings. Meetings were organised at night to suit most people, and if needed people would be picked up and

taken home. The project office was used as the meeting place. Later these discussions were moved to a local flat rather than the formal office, as people were more comfortable there and could often walk to the flat together.

In the first phase of the Doggies to Highpoint project, community working group members were trained to undertake 'kitchen table' type conversations with other community members. Although the kitchen table model served as the framework for these conversations, there was a cultural preference for 'not letting strangers in our homes', so the tool was modified into 'talk time' to connect to this community.

The requests and needs identified by people at these conversations were very simple. The outcomes did not reflect the real needs in the opinion of the community development worker, but they did show that a high level of connection was needed to enable these people to participate in the community and in work. The table talk tool was significant for its informality and the way it enabled people from different backgrounds to find a voice and to develop confidence to say what their needs and interests were and how these might better be met.

The members of the community working group were committed to and excited about the idea that as a result of their training they would be able to relate to the wider community and encourage participation. Significantly, they were appropriately connected and sensitive to the cultural needs of the community. Over time, the community working group evolved to become the 'community leaders' group', although this label sat uncomfortably with most members.

The Doggies to Highpoint project was not very active in the beginning and progress was slow. This was a highly transient community, not very well connected to people or resources. Workers encountered many difficulties just establishing the opportunity for people to meet, and then encouraging them to come to table talk groups. Other pressures in people's lives – such as child minding, job seeking and a lack of English language skills – made participation difficult, and it was a challenge for the community workers to support engagement in these circumstances.

The information gathering strategies applied in this project were simple but effective in determining the community's immediate needs, while supporting the connection of community members to each other and to resources. Seemingly simple tools such as table talk and the establishment of the community working group allowed for discussion, story telling and an opportunity to make primary needs explicit.

Establishing: East Gippsland

The second case study, East Gippsland, illustrates:

- a project with *rural youth* focus;
- the *middle stages of development* of community readiness;
- a community *being established* to connect and develop teams;
- information gathering strategies which are *formal*, *structured* and *community driven*;
- community workers who have *some experience* in the role and with the community;
- an *established*, *English speaking*, *rural* community.

In the rural, regional community of East Gippsland, the community building demonstration project was initially intended to be developed as three or four projects across the region. The very first information gathering exercise, an information session for community members, was attended by 80–100 residents. Overwhelmingly, the community was committed to a region-wide focus and not content with the idea of a number of smaller projects.

With this high level of community engagement and commitment to stimulate the development of the project, the community worker gathered information about the focus for the project. Community members were reasonably united in their perspective on what was the most critical issue for East Gippsland: the fact that the needs of young people weren't being met caused them to leave the area, providing a great risk to the growth of the region as well as to community well-being. So the focus quickly emerged as 'engaging young people'. Young people were categorised as those aged 12 to 25 years, and in fact, this project did engage people at both ends of this age grouping. One dilemma which quickly became apparent was that this was a transient population: many moved about as they left school and went to other places

to work or study. Furthermore, as participants aged beyond 25 years they would no longer be members of this group. This distinctive characteristic meant that the long-term sustainability of the delivery of an action plan needed special attention over time.

East Gippsland is a community with a history of government projects and interventions. As these had not always served community members well, there was a mixed response to the introduction of the project. Initially there were many requests for things like a skate park and other fixtures. A high level of cynicism was evident: people doubted their ability to sustain anything which was only funded for the establishment phase of the first three years.

> We don't have the resources and the rate base to keep on supporting these initiatives after the end of the three years.

The community worker stimulated a high level of community interest, first sparked by the information session and a survey conducted at this meeting. This was followed up by a personal phone call to every person who completed the survey. This personal contact was also used to link people to agencies, government contacts and other stakeholders focussing on youth and youth issues, who attended a workshop for about 30 people. This workshop was followed by many individual face-to-face meetings.

The whole process was dramatically interrupted by the bushfires. This delayed the project but at the same time added new commitment, drew the community together, and stimulated an urgent need for a community action plan.

> That was a huge community demolition experience. A disaster – and we were all very engaged with that when it happened.

The most important task was to get the youth, absent so far, to the table. A large forum was held at a campsite, attracting 70 young people. They were recruited through a coloured advertising brochure and direct approaches through schools and agencies. The camp attracted representatives from all community groups: male and female, disabled, indigenous, etc. VET students assisted with the preparation of questionnaires. Interviews and videos were made at the forum and the ideas presented. A significant outcome was the generation of a website, which went on to become a

key tool for communication and information gathering in this community. Information sharing on the website, web chats and email links were highly used.

A second powerful outcome was the ongoing use of forums and interviews as well as personal conversations to keep the information about the community up to date and relevant. A later forum established a basis for consolidation by facilitating discussion and making young people's visions and values for the future explicit. This strong networking allowed groups to apply successfully for funding for significant projects and led to the development of longer term goals for community engagement, particularly with local government. A regional youth committee was formed:

> In the long term they may actually become, and we are looking at them becoming, a committee of the Council.

The community worker was aware of the fragility of these initiatives without sustained interest, commitment and resources. They will need to be maintained predominantly as voluntary groups, but sufficiently resourced so that networks and actions can be realised for community well-being. The community action plan was able to draw on other existing projects and new funding sources which often related to arts and culture. While this was not a specific focus, it did emerge that there were related projects in this area.

> PARENT: 'I don't know if you realize this, but my son was this way, this way and the other and wouldn't come out of his room much – and since his involvement with this project he has just been a changed person.'

Consolidating: Geelong

The third and final case study, Geelong, illustrates:

- a project with *regional city* focus;
- the *later stages of development* of community readiness;
- a community which is *consolidating* its communication and teams;
- *more formal and structured methods* for information gathering as the project moved to action, planning and delivery;
- a community worker who is *experienced* in the role and in this community;

- an *established*, *English speaking* community.

When the Geelong demonstration project began, there was already a 'rich history of engagement' within and around the community. In the establishment of the project it was therefore critical that the context was well considered.

There was a strong network of community workers, project officers and community members who had been part of the community for a long time. They knew each other well and also had strong links to potential partners and significant community leaders. It was therefore possible to initiate a reference group for the project 12 months before commencing. There was thus time to talk, to network, to connect and to spread the word of the project well before it commenced. The community development worker appointed to the project was also a local community member who had worked on a range of community activities in the past and was well-known to other workers and community members.

> We live locally too; I knew the champions.

A number of complementary projects were occurring. The Reference Group remained mindful that this new project would not duplicate or interfere with the 12 existing projects. There was a need to explore and align values and operation activities so that projects would indeed be complementary. It was consequently important for all the project workers and various agency officers to have good rapports and be able to share information about projects. While this communication existed, not all community experiences have been seen as successful.

> There has been a lot of research done and a lot of promises broken

After an extensive consultation period of six months, the community development workers engaged in six months of data gathering. As they needed to employ a range of information techniques or tools to engage the community, they conducted some trials with people they knew to stimulate talking and thinking together. These trials were kitchen table conversations targeting key people in the community and focussed on four key points:

- strengths;

- what they liked;
- what needed to change; and
- who should be involved.

The get-togethers were informal, usually in the afternoon, and the provision and sharing of food – such as lunch, afternoon tea or a barbeque – was important to create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. These gatherings grew in number, rolling on from each other, and so there was no need to plan a set number of kitchen tables.

> Consultations showed that people want to contribute

> Informal conversations provided rich data.

As a result of the table talks and other data gathering, developing ideas and working within a clear understanding of the context, a whole community plan was developed. An important goal was to achieve cohesion among all the projects and bring them together. Initial enthusiasm needed to be maintained; keeping people interested and involved was a challenge at first.

Once the work was progressing, the confidence of individuals and their trust in the community workers grew. The word spread and more and more people began to join in activities and to contribute, taking on leadership roles and initiating and facilitating workshops. Sustainability of relationships, networks and workshops was important. Barriers to engagement were identified and strategically tackled. Importantly, it became clear that it was helpful to build on people's existing skills and interests.

> They get a lot out of that. It's more a complementary style of participation. They get something out of it for themselves, plus they get to give something to the community.

The Geelong project community workers were able to select from a range of information strategies to flexibly respond to the needs of the community. These workers had a close working knowledge of the community and of both previous and concurrent community development projects. Careful selection meant that this project could fuse neatly with existing projects and draw on their experience and successes. It

was important in this community to establish and maintain strong links with council and government agencies, so that a coordinated approach could be implemented and community members were respected in all projects.

5.3.2 Four elements contributing to community readiness

As the case studies illustrate, the readiness of a community for community building intervention was a central factor determining the effectiveness of particular information gathering methods. The level of readiness of the community depends on four variables: *teams*, *talk*, *time* and *trust*. These reflect a trajectory of community readiness from engaging via establishing to consolidating. Once all four conditions have been met, the community becomes more self-initiating and self-managing. The role of the community worker is central to this development, in recognising and responding wisely to the various stages of readiness.

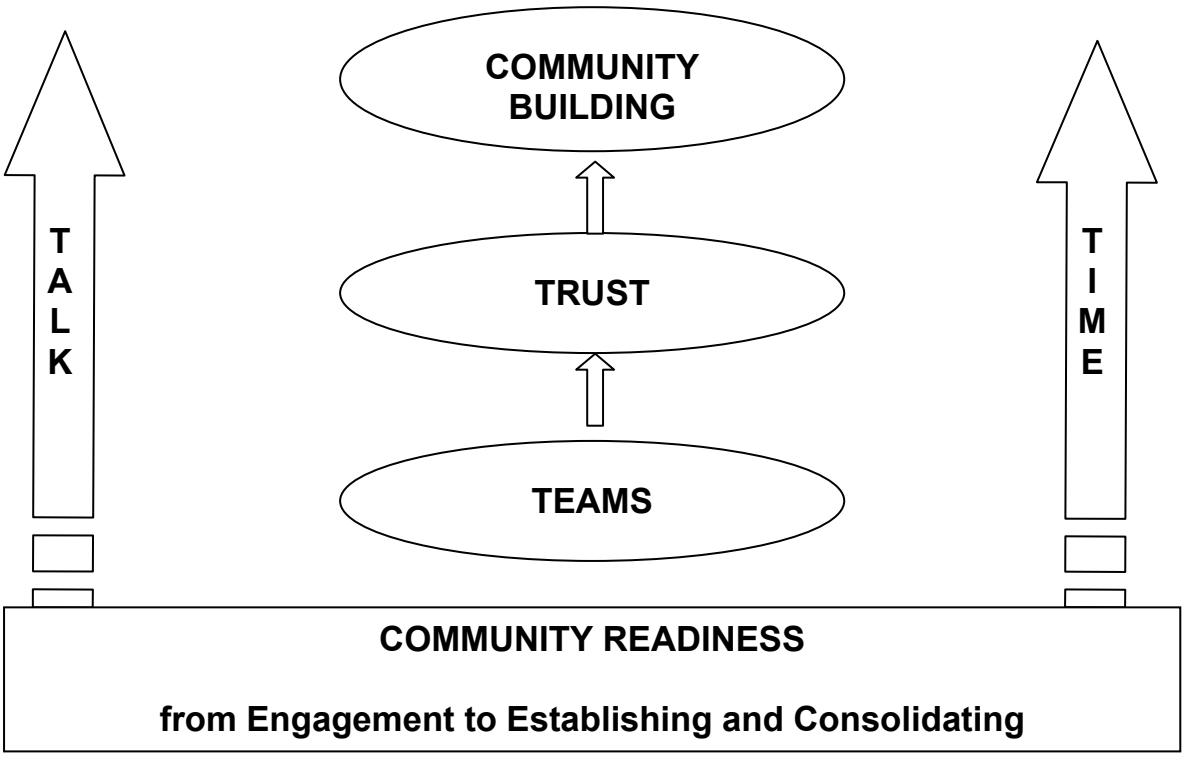

Figure 5.1 Relationship between the conditions for successful information gathering and community building

All four elements – *teams*, *talk*, *time* and *trust* – must be present for the information gathering to be effective. Each of these factors is interdependent on the other

elements. Success depends on the relationship between the four conditions rather than on the simple existence of any or all of them. In addition, appropriate resources are required to enable the work to occur.

a Teams

The starting point for successful information gathering for community building is formed by teams of project workers and/or volunteers who:

- can work together collaboratively;
- complement each other's skills and knowledge;
- represent a range of diverse community interests and needs; and
- can develop shared values and vision for the outcomes of the project.

Nurturing a successful team takes time, talk and trust. Teams must be encouraged to evolve throughout the life of the project.

b Talk

The ability to communicate easily with linguistically and culturally diverse individuals and groups within communities is essential. It ensures that community knowledge is respected and that the selection and application of community building tools results in authentic development of courses of action for community strengthening that are owned and recognised by the community members. The process must be allowed to be shaped by the conversations between individuals. This takes time. The use of translators may be critical in some communities, and representative teams of community mentors or leaders will be needed.

c Time

In our projects, improvement is an outcome of inclusive practices and of the trial and implementation of carefully thought out development strategies. Developing long-term sustainable practices to support such change takes time. Success will be based on the reflective conversations of participants and on participants' confidence that their contributions to the change process and the action plan will be valued.

d Trust

Trust can be considered the 'glue' that builds relationships for successful information gathering for community building. It is generated from *talk* over *time*, which leads to people feeling safe to contribute their needs, goals and visions for the community. The trust that is built up enables individuals and groups to become more aware of their own agency, and therefore to take greater responsibility for the Community Action Plan and its delivery.

5.3.3 Readiness to act and formality of methods

Informal methods for information gathering (as described in section 5.2.2) need more support and structure from the community worker when the community is less ready for action. This can be seen in the Doggies to Highpoint case study, where the working group needed support: interpreters were present at the meetings, food was bought by the worker and members were driven to the venue by the worker. The working group also needed structure in taking on the table talk conversation task. They were trained and given a modified kit to use.

In contrast, in the Ballan project – also using the table talk method – community members organised the conversation venue and food themselves and did not receive training or support, other than key questions, to run these conversations.

When we identified the community in the Geelong project as more ready for action, we did not mean the targeted community was more organised, but rather that the precinct was in the consolidation phase of community building.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Information gathering for community building is a social practice that occurs over time, within a trajectory of community change. Project workers make use of a range of information gathering tools, which differ in their level of formality and the amount of support required to implement them. These tools all have specific project settings for which they are most appropriate.

Effective use of information gathering tools for community building

We identified 26 qualitative information gathering methods and strategies that are used in current Victorian practice. Six tools were described in detail: *using key people as informants*, *table talk*, *conversations with existing networks*, *asset mapping*, *story telling* and *training volunteers to collect information*.

A consideration of the best practice uses of these methods yielded three main findings:

- In all projects, information gathering happened in conjunction with engagement, the development of a social connection between the project worker and the community and between community members.
- Face-to-face individual contact was important for information gathering and developing relationships, and in general group-based methods gave participants the best chance to meet others and make their own connections.
- The importance of trust and respect was evident. Workers chose information gathering tools according to the need to develop trust. Trust was also developed by project workers' engaging with people, providing tangible short-term outcomes and increasing participants' familiarity with the information gathering method. Continuity of community workers was an important factor underpinning the success of information gathering and community building.

Community building workers do not use information gathering tools in a linear way. They do not apply a tool, observe how it works and then choose another, but rather choose aspects from a range of methods and form a mix that suits their community. Furthermore, as indicated, each activity generally combines the aim of information

gathering with other community building aims, such as engaging, empowering, strengthening groups and developing agendas.

An information gathering toolbox will be useful in the same way that a recipe is useful: it will work best when adapted to the setting. Consequently, the set-up of a resource for workers or community members needs to take this into account. The best way to present the tools would be to give simple, clear-cut descriptions of each and to add stories and examples of practice that illustrate how these tools may be used in different settings.

Differences in community readiness and in formality of tools

The field work showed that the communities from which information was being sought varied enormously. This variation had a lot to do with the effectiveness of the chosen tools. The readiness of the community for community building intervention was an important factor determining the choice of information gathering tools. For example, information can only be sought through tapping into community networks if such networks exist. In some (urban) communities there was very little pre-existing connection among community members.

We have identified three stages of community readiness for community building practice:

- *engaging and stimulating interest*: networks need to be developed and there is not much contact yet in the community;
- *establishing* and developing an action plan: the community already has considerable networks and resources, which may be built on;'
- *consolidation*: community building is in underway and the community has some ownership of it.

Tools range in their level of formality. The choice between formal or informal tools depends for an important part on the stage of readiness of the community. More informal tools generally work best in less ready communities and generally engender more trust than formal tools. Such tools, such as talking around a familiar table, are most appropriate when 'getting to know while getting known' (engaging with a community while finding out information). However, a community in the early stages

of community readiness may need considerable support in order to make use of such tools. The quality of the data gathered will depend to a large extent on the level of trust established with the participants. Informal methods remain important throughout the development of community building.

More formal tools, such as forums and workshops, are better suited to communities that show more readiness to engage in community building and have already developed resources to do so. Information collected using more formal tools is generally easier to record and as such is more useful in presenting information to others and gaining support for an action plan.

A web-based resource on information gathering tools

A further purpose of the 'Talking Communities' project was to develop a resource on key qualitative information gathering methods in community building. To this aim, the resources available on the Internet were investigated to avoid any duplication. An extensive Internet search showed that while there is a range of websites that describe qualitative information gathering methods, most are difficult to find without the precise web address. More importantly, generally they do not take a community building perspective. A review and evaluation of the web-based and printed literature identified the most useful resources that are already available.

If a Victorian community building website is developed, it should include a web-based guide for using qualitative information gathering tools in community building work. The guide may make use of some of the already available descriptions of such tools, but it will need to provide material illustrating their use in accordance with community building aims. The best way to do this would be to provide simple descriptions and how-to guides together with stories and examples of their use.

Appendix 1: Projects visited and people interviewed

Office of Community Building Demonstration Projects	*Interviewees*
Bass Coast	**Bass Coast Shire Council** *Helen Padalini* – Project Manager
East Gippsland	**East Gippsland Shire Council** *Eva Grunden* – Project Manager *Sharyn Dickeson* – Project Officer
Dandenong	**City of Greater Dandenong** *Hugh Kilgower* – Project Manger *Agnus Lichtor* – Project Officer *Jodi Sneddon* – Senior Project Officer, Department of Sustainability and Environment
Geelong	**City of Greater Geelong** *Cathy Walker* – Project Worker
Warrnambool	**Warrnambool City Council** *Kellie King* – Project Manager *Anne Waters* – Executive Manager, Community Development *Jeremy Moloney* – Community Consultation Manager, Department of Sustainability and Environment
Shepparton	**City of Greater Shepparton** *Dennis Wapling* – Project Manager
Central Goldfields	**Maryborough Precinct** *Neale Chandler* – Project Manager *Lee Duffin* – Administrative Assistant
Pyrenees	**Shire of Pyrenees** *Marita Reynolds* – Project Manager
Darebin	**Darebin City Council** *Sally Bruen* – Community Development Worker
Maribyrnong	**Mission Australia** *Michael Howley* – Services Manager *Klara Blazevic* – Community Development Worker *Paola Bilbrough* – Community Development Worker

Community Capacity Building Initiatives	***Interviewees***
Ouyen	*Jennifer Grigg* **–** Project Facilitator
Ballan	*Sally Goldstraw* – Project Facilitator
Lang Lang	*Allan Gurr* – Project Facilitator
St Arnaud	*Elizabeth Reynolds* – Project Facilitator

Other	***Interviewees***
City of Port Phillip	**Community and Health Development** *Peter Streker* – Coordinator
Connect For Kids	**Berry Street** *Lyn Radford* – Research Assistant
Department of Human Services: **Neighbourhood Renewal**	**Housing and Community Building** *Toni Morton* – Project Manager
Department of Human Services: **Disability Services**	**Community Building Unit** *Christine Mathieson* – Manager *Paul Dunn* – Senior Project Officer
Department of Victorian Communities: **Community Capacity Building Initiative**	**Regional Development Victoria** *Cathryne Peterson* – State Coordinator CCBI Projects **Office of Community Building** *Diana Rice* – Policy Officer

Appendix 2: Community Readiness – Background to the Concept

Originally created for use within drug abuse prevention programs, the concept of community readiness has been actively adapted across allied health fields to better assess the readiness of a community to implement prevention and early intervention programs. Based on the model of stages of personal readiness developed by Prochaska and DiClemente in the 1980s,[4] the theory and model of community readiness provide a practical tool for helping a community mobilise for change centred around its needs, challenges and unique identity. Community readiness theory has been successfully used in health and nutrition programs, particularly with depression and AIDS awareness, and in environmental issues, such as litter and recycling, as well as in social programs such as suicide prevention and domestic violence programs.[5]

The concept of community readiness was initially developed into a model by the Tri-Ethnic Centre for Prevention Research in response to the knowledge – gained over the last few decades – that many well-intentioned prevention and early intervention programs were failing to create the sustainable change within communities that they were designed for. Furthermore, although there was increasing awareness within the community development field that '*prevention efforts should emphasise collaboration and cooperation among community agencies and generally be part of a broader community health and wellness vision*'[6] in order to create sustainability, many communities were continuing to struggle to maintain community programs.

Indeed, particularly in health and community building programs, communities still often have difficulties with the development, implementation and sustainability of efforts. Programs that are successful in one community are often not as successful in another community, and may even fail altogether in attempting to create the sustainable change.

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[4] First presented at the University of Kentucky Society for Prevention Research Conference.
[5] Edward, R.W., Jumper-Thurman, P., Plested, B., Oetting, E., & Swanson, L. (2000). 'Community readiness: Research to practice,' *Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(3), pp. 291–307, and Oetting, R., Jumper-Thurman, P., Plested, R., & Edwards, R. (2001). 'Community readiness and health services,' *Substance Use and Misuse*, 36(6&7), pp. 825–843.
[6] Edward et al, op cit, p. 2.

Parallel research efforts in recent years have shown that these less than successful outcomes across all types of community programs are related to varying community *attitudes*, *resources* and *political climates*. Attitudes concerning what is acceptable behaviour can be quite different across communities, and this can influence the time and energy a community is willing to commit to change. In addition, communities vary in what they view as requiring change. Also, communities are fluid and often need and want different things at different times.[7] The level of resources can also impact on community programs. While one community may have ample access to volunteers and a high degree of skills essential to a particular program, another community may not.

Furthermore, the current political climate within a community – in terms of government, non-government and volunteer organisations – can affect the success of community programs and their ability to challenge the status quo in a community. A strong and accessible local government can provide strong political support and lobby for change within the community, while a weak or disinterested local government can hinder efforts towards change, adding to the frustration many communities experience when implementing community programs.

The key to sustainable change is to assess the starting point of the community and tailor the community program to that starting point. If this factor is not taken into account, communities can experience high levels of frustration and loss of interest, due to insufficient training or support for members and poorly run, unsuccessful community programs. The assessment of stages of readiness is based on information collected from interviews with key informants or community leaders. Once the stage of readiness has been determined, project workers can initiate informal focus groups, public forums and workshops around key issues in the community to develop plans to move forward.

[7] Jumper-Thurman, P., Plested, B., Edwards, R., Helm, H., & Oetting, E. (2001). 'Community readiness: A promising model for community healing,' Department of Justice Monograph, Office for Victims of Crime, Centre on Child Abuse and Neglect, ed. Bigfoot-Subia, D., pp. 1–14.

To produce an effective and sustainable outcome, research over the last ten years has shown that health programs must be based around the many and varied systems within the community and draw upon the skills and strengths inherent in that community. Furthermore, health programs need to be culturally relevant taking into account historical issues, but with an emphasis on the program as long-term in nature. The same may be assumed for community building.

Lastly, the concept of community readiness is appropriate for health prevention and community building programs because it allows the flexibility needed for these types of programs. Implementing health prevention and community building programs is often difficult and is done in a fluid context with political changes and leadership movement. Also, change occurs on a broad level rather than at the readily observable individual level. At these points of change the concept of community readiness encourages a re-evaluation of the stage of readiness of the community. This can then be channelled into re-tailoring the program to better suit the needs of the community and promote change.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography contains sources that were consulted for the review of literature on qualitative methods in community building. The numbers correspond to the references in square brackets [ ] in chapter 2.

Websites

All sites were visited in October–December 2003. Those marked with # were revisited in March 2004.

Overall most useful sites

1. *Citizen Science* (site established by a CRC (Cooperative Research Centre) at Griffith University QLD) # www.coastal.crc.org.au/toolbox/index.asp

2. *Vancouver Citizen's Handbook* # http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook

3. *Community Tool Box*, University of Kansas # http://ctb.ku.edu/

4. *Citizens and Civic Units* (Western Australian Government) # http://www.ccu.dpc.wa.gov.au /docs/guidecolour.pdf

Story telling

5. Susan E. Waller. 'Story Telling and Community Visioning: Tools for Sustainability'# Background Paper for the State Sustainability Strategy, Sustainability Policy Unit WA Department for the Premier and Cabinet. September http://www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au/docs/BGPapers/Waller%20S%20-%20Story telling.pdf

6. *Community Arts Network* # http://www.communityarts.net/concal/

A site called 'Connecting Californians' which presents the story of a research project on community building using story telling and the arts.

7. Anne Gartner, Gloria Latham, Susan Merritt. The power of narrative: transcending disciplines #
   Academic site from RMIT.
   http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/Articles/dec96/gartn1.htm

Australia / community

8. New South Wales, *Communitybuilders* #
   Interactive electronic clearing house for community building. Extensive and useful site, but few concrete methods or resources.
   http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/getting_started/needs/cookbook.html

9. Western Australia, *Citizenscape* #
   Aimed primarily at citizens about getting involved in community decision making.
   http://www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?fuseaction=active.howtotips

10. Queensland Council of Social Service #
    Has an interesting funding resource manual.
    http://www.qcoss.org.au/

11. Maureen Rogers, La Trobe University, articles like 'Small Towns: Big Picture' #
    Rural community sustainability; several academic papers etc.
    www.latrobe.edu.au/csrc/aboutus/bio/maureenrogers.html

12. Ian Hughes, University of Sydney, *Community Study Knowledge Base* #
    Student oriented; community profile; includes ethical issues.
    http://www2.fhs.usyd.edu.au/bach/pub/community/thisite.htm

Qualitative research sites

13. *Resources for Methods for Evaluation and Social Research.* #

Most useful site. One section dealing with methods provides links to about 40 websites about qualitative methods.
http://gsociology.icaap.org/methods

14. *The Qualitative Report* – an online journal dedicated to qualitative research #
Provides 10 pages of links to qualitative research sites.
http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/web.html

15. *The Handbook for Evaluating HIV Education* #
Contains a detailed and insightful comparison of five commonly used qualitative methods used in research involving adolescents.
http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/publications/hiv_handbook/hiv_booklet9/methods.htm

16. *Gathering Evidence – A Guide for Using Focus groups*, Cornwall County Council (UK) #
A regional authority in the UK has produced some pages on their website providing excellent details about all aspects of running a focus group.
http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/consultation/focuscontents.htm

17. *The Use and Misuse of Focus Groups*
Brief notes on focus group methods and costs.
http://www.useit.com/papers/focusgroups.html

18. Bill Trochim, Cornell University, social research methods
Student-oriented, includes *concept mapping*; Community Development links; evaluating websites; some brief points on specific qualitative methods.
http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/

19. Bob Dick, Southern Cross University
Includes convergent interviewing as a method.
http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/iview.html

20. *Narrative Psychology*, Lemoyne College NY

Many links but mainly academic/student oriented.

http://maple.lemoyne.edu/~hevern/narpsych.html

21. International Institute for Qualitative Methodology, University of Alberta #

    http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/index.html

22. Association for Qualitative Research

    Site about the association based at La Trobe University.

    http://www.latrobe.edu.au/aqr

23. Don Ratcliff

    http://don.ratcliff.net/qual/

24. Boeree

    http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/qualmeth.html

25. Bobbi Kerlins

    http://kerlins.net/bobbi/research/qualresearch/bibliography/

Community and Evaluation

26. Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE)

    List of USAID evaluation publications.

    http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/usaid_eval/#toc

27. *Making Connections* (draft)

    Participatory evaluation; includes 'Making Connections' draft document by Stoecker.

    http://sasweb.utoledo.edu/drafts/evalppranon.htm#intro

28. Virtual Resource Centre on Participatory Development

    http://www.pdforum-org/vrc/

29. Virtual Library / Public Health / Community Organization / Development

List of websites, annotated

http://www.ldb.org/vl/top-comm.htm

30. *Communities Online*

http://www.communities.org.uk/

31. International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives

http://www.iclei.org/

32. *Mande News* #

A news service focusing on monitoring and evaluation methods relevant to social development.

http://www.mande.co.uk

33. *Sustainable Measures*

Designed for those who wish to develop sustainable community indicators.

http://www.sustainablemeasures.com/

Other Community Resources – mainly USA/Canada

34. International Association for Public Participation – *Toolbox* #

One page chart that sets out increasing levels of public impact versus what the goals and promises may be. The matrix leads to a short list of possible tools that could be used, depending on context.

www.iap2.org/ practitionertools/spectrum.html

35. *Communities by Choice*

Focus on sustainable development.

http://www.communitiesbychoice.org/pubs.cfm

36. *Cultural Creatives*

Contains some useful links to community resource sites.

http://www.culturalcreatives.org/community.html

37. Sustainable Communities Network

http://www.sustainable.org/

38. National Community Building Network

http://www.ncbn.org/

39. Comm-org

Online conference on community organising and development.

http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/

40. *Community Development Tool Box*, Illinois

May be useful for its Community Capacity Index and the section on surveys.

http://www.communitydevelopment.uiuc.edu/toolbox/

41. *Community Toolbox – Rural Empowerment*

Potentially useful section on principles of community empowerment.

http://www.ezec.gov/toolbox/

42. Community Building Resource Exchange #

Focus on details about projects termed Comprehensive Community Building Initiatives (CCIs).

http://www.commbuild.org/

43. *Community Development Society*, Columbus, Ohio

http://comm-dev.org/new/

44. *Community Building Resources*, Edmonton, Canada

http://www.cbr-aimhigh.com/

45. Civic Practices Network

http://www.cpn.org/index.html

46. Pratt Institute (PICCED)

http://www.picced.org/lowres/index.html

47. Grass-Roots

http://www.grass-roots.org/

48. Center for Community Change

http://www.communitychange.org/default.asp

49. Community Development Foundation, Mississippi

http://www.cdfms.org/ed_industrialparks.cfm

Academic (with various possibly useful links)

50. University of Harvard – *Community Problem Solving* #

Currently under construction, is promising for its potential to provide links to a range of resources, but its approach is not intuitive for searching out methods to use or related tips.

http://www.community-problem-solving.net/CMS/viewpage.cfm?pageId=199

51. Society for Community Research and Action

Division 27 of the American Psychological Association

http://www.apa.org/divisions/div27/

52. Community Psychology, Manchester Met University (UK)

Extensive links

http://www.compsy.org.uk

53. Community Psychology Network (USA)

http://www.communitypsychology.net/#links

54. Participatory Action Research

http://www.parnet.org

55. Association for Information Systems

http://www.qual.auckland.ac.nz

56. Martin Ryder, University of Colorado
http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/pract_res.html

Other varied Australian resources

57. (Australian) Local Government *FOCUS* Newspaper Online
Worth searching for current projects and initiatives etc.
http://www.lgfocus.aus.net/

58. *Social Change* Online
http://online.socialchange.net.au/

59. *A Manual for the Use of Focus Groups*, University of Queensland #
http://www.unu.edu/unupress/food2/uin03e/uin03e00.htm

Printed literature

Overall most useful printed literature on tool kits

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62. Borough of Burnley, Britain. *Public Involvement and Consultation Kit*

Asset mapping

63. Allen, J. C. (1999), *Building Communities from the Inside Out: Asset Inventories*. Presented at the Australian Regional Summit, Canberra, October 26–29.
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Focus groups

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and consumer science research. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 27(4), 428–450.

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Overall focuses on meeting, workshops, surveys, search conferences and public meetings, providing lots of practical advice on how to set these up. Contains a valuable section on common problems that may be experienced (section 2–4). (For purchase, email istp@murdoch.edu.au.)
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