



The Neighbourhood House & Learning Centre Sector Framework

March 2003

Neighbourhood Houses Victoria Inc

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Context

The Future Directions Working Party was formed at the Association of Neighbourhood Houses & Learning Centres (ANHLC) 2001 Conference - Building Houses to develop a document that describes the vision, philosophy, principles, and practice of our sector. The purpose of this document is to strengthen our Sector through a consistent description of our philosophy, principles, practice, manner of operation and structure.

In the development of this document the working party modelled the community development practice that the framework describes. This was done by: endorsement for the development of documents from the sector via the ANHLC conference, representative working party membership, research and analysis, drafting of documents for consultation, feedback from the sector via consultations and individual submissions, redrafting of documents incorporating feedback, the final draft being submitted for external editing and formatting. The Sector Framework was formally launched at the 2003 ANHLC Conference – Celebrating Country in Swan Hill.

Individual Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres are encouraged to use this document in the orientation and induction of new house participants and Committee members, and in discussions or negotiations with Local Government, politicians, businesses and other organisations. It will also be a useful tool in negotiations with funding bodies, establishing corporate partnerships and in educating local communities.

History

Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres were first established in Victoria in the early 1970s. The movement grew from the grass roots out of local community need, particularly the isolation of women in the community, with a vision to bring people together and enhance the opportunities of people and communities. Another initial emphasis was to provide an informal, non-threatening and nurturing environment that supported individualised learning.

During the 1970s, the sector developed with the first network of houses (CHAOS) established in 1978. A peak body, the Association of Neighbourhood Learning Centres

(later known as the Association of Neighbourhood Houses & Learning Centres) was formed in 1979.

Initially most houses and centres were staffed by volunteers with only small amounts of federal, state and local government funding provided. In 1986, the Neighbourhood House Scheme, later named the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program (NHCP), was established by the Victorian state government to provide secure, recurrent funding for the coordination of activities in neighbourhood houses. In the early 1990s many houses also became eligible for Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) funding. Many Local Governments also provide funding to Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres.

Significant volunteer involvement in houses and centres as well as community-based management and a focus on community development were initial features and have remained strong themes throughout the growth of the movement and its evolution to an essential community sector.

The sector has withstood the challenges of sustaining local communities in a climate of dramatic change over the past few decades. Today there are over 350 Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres in Victoria and over one thousand neighbourhood and community houses throughout Australia. The number continues to increase in response to the ever-changing needs of diverse communities.

What is a Neighbourhood House

“Neighbourhood House” is a generic term for a variety of community owned and managed organisations that share a set of defining features. The sector organisations are called by a variety of terms reflecting the varied historical beginnings of each organisation. These names include amongst others: Community House, Living and Learning Centre, Neighbourhood Centre, Learning Centre.

The common thread is that they are all not-for-profit organisations where available funds are combined with a strong community volunteer input to ensure maximum benefit to each diverse community. Each House or Centre is a legal entity in its own right, or auspiced by a legal entity and has a formal (and in some cases, financial) membership base. The community is defined primarily, but not exclusively, by the geographical neighbourhood in which houses are located.

Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centers are community owned generalist services, which are unequalled in their ability to provide a continuity of service to people through their changing life stages. The activities and programs provided have developed in relation to the needs of the neighbourhood, other community local infrastructures and resource constraints.

The Neighbourhood House sector in Australia includes over a thousand organisations. Its continued success is assured as individuals and communities discover the potential to connect and bring together divergent parts of each community.

Sector Vision

Building community, valuing diversity

Sector Purpose Statement

Building sustainable community connections with choice, opportunity and flexibility that is responsive to local needs and issues.

Sector Philosophy Statement

The Neighbourhood House and Learning Centre sector works within a community development framework. Change and growth occurs through informing and empowering individuals and communities. Houses and Centres do not seek to do for others but to empower others to do for themselves. Members are encouraged to be actively involved in decision making and to have ownership of the programs and activities in their house or centre.

Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres integrate learning into all aspects of their activities. Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres actively work to redress structural disadvantage in society through their philosophy, principles and practices. They are inclusive and supportive of people from diverse backgrounds and with

varying abilities. Houses and Centres aim to improve the social, environmental, economic and cultural infrastructures within their communities.

Sector Principles

Community Ownership: To set, manage and control the direction, resources, decision-making and processes of the Neighbourhood House or Centre in order that local volunteer members have a sense of ownership and intrinsic belonging.

Community Participation: To recognise that everyone has a valuable contribution to make and to facilitate community members to join in at any level. Volunteers and community members are integral to the decision making, evaluation, provision, participation and direction setting at all levels of the organisation.

Empowerment: To put into practice a process which respects, values and enhances people's ability to have control of their lives. This process encourages people to meet their needs and aspirations in a self-aware and informed way which takes advantage of their skills, experience and potential.

Access and Equity: To ensure fair and equitable access for all people. Striving to make accessible to individuals, groups and the community meaningful opportunities, programs, activities and services. To promote a fairer distribution of economic resources and power between people.

Lifelong Learning: To build and support the personal skills, knowledge, abilities and resilience of people. To develop the health, wellbeing and connection of people and their families, through formal and informal pathways in education, employment and self-development. Inclusion: To value the diverse contributions that people make and to be sensitive to their individual needs.

Networking: To link, form alliances, collaborate and work with individuals, groups, other agencies, government and business.

Advocacy: To act with and on behalf of community members to endeavour that their individual or group needs are met.

Self Help: To come together in a supportive group environment to share information, knowledge, skills and life experience in order that each participant can reach their own personal goals.

Social Action: To analyse internal and external factors that impact on the local community, to transform relationships between individuals, groups and organisations and within the community through collective action.

Sector Practice Statement

Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres operate across a continuum of practice at the Governance, Management, Operational, and Delivery levels that are reflective of the resources, funding, support, and participation levels within the local community.

The strength and distinctiveness of the sector model of practice is the interaction between formal and informal methods to achieve connections within their local community. Houses and centres are accessible and welcoming, situated in local community settings. It is often through informal interaction that local needs and issues are identified. Identifying these needs and issues through a range of methods is instrumental in informing the planning and development of activities and programs.

Governance

As community-based and legally-constituted organisations, neighbourhood houses are governed by a voluntary management committee, collective, or board comprising elected members who live, work, or participate in the local community. The governing body is legally accountable to its membership base to endorse the strategic and policy framework of the organisation, ensuring the financial viability of the legal entity, and ensuring compliance with all legislative, statutory and contractual duties, obligations and requirements.

This form of governance gives validity to the concept of a community-based organisation, responsive and accountable to the local community through its membership base, and to the external bodies or authorities with whom it has formal working relationships or funding and service agreements.

The governance model is developmental, with the governing body working co-operatively and collaboratively with staff, volunteers, house participants and the wider community, thus generating a range of community benefits.

Management

Management functions are undertaken by the co-ordinator or manager who is employed by the governing body. The management role is shaped by the governing body and, while distinct from the governance role, is responsible to (a) advise and inform the governing body, and (b) to manage the operations, internal processes, and day-to-day affairs and activities of the organisation.

Operations

Operational tasks are undertaken by staff and tutors in partnership with volunteers. Members of the governing body are frequently involved in volunteer effort to complement or support the work of paid staff. The role and contribution of volunteers is significant, producing benefits for all involved.

Neighbourhood Houses plan, develop, and manage the operational structure of the organisation for optimal responsiveness to the complex and diverse needs of their local communities, in accordance with their statement of purpose.

Delivery

Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres provide a wide array of activities, programs and services for people from their local communities from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, of a wide range of all abilities and ages (0 – 100+ years old). They use this wide array of programs to achieve community building and connections, and facilitate life-long learning for individuals, groups, and organisations in the community. Programs are developed in response to identified community needs, and in line with available resources.

People come to neighbourhood houses because they are local, accessible, welcoming, and non-threatening, and because programs are designed to meet the needs of participants and prospective participants. A key strength of Houses and Centres is that they are flexible, adaptive, responsive and inclusive.

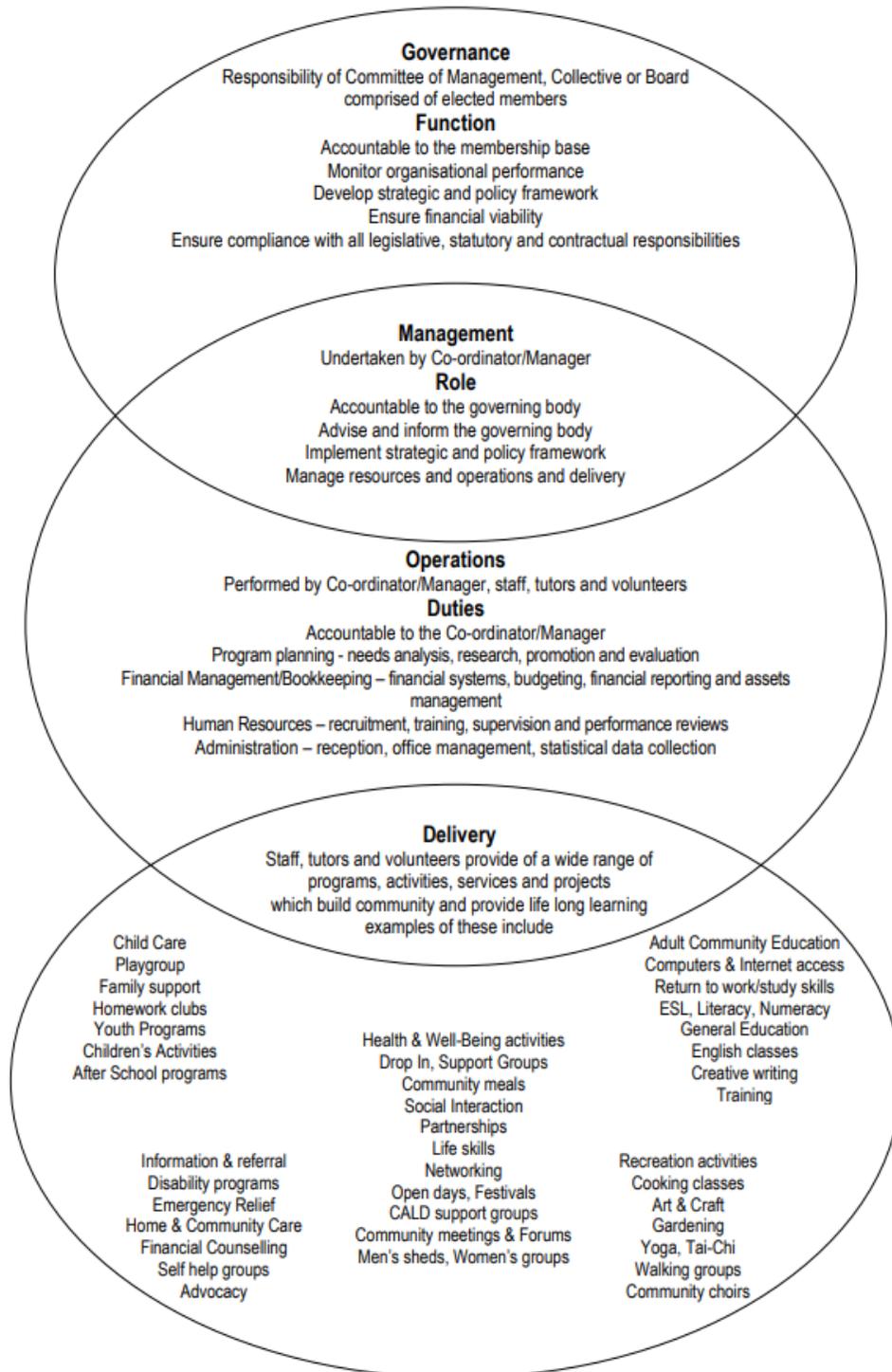
Structure

This model of practice extends to how the sector is structured. Houses and Centres as independent legal entities work collectively via membership of regionally based, incorporated Neighbourhood House Networks. The Networks resource and support the governance, management, operation and delivery of individual houses at the local level. They also advocate on behalf of their membership at the local and state level.

Networks are an integral component of the Peak Body – Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. Issues, needs and developments are fed from the local level through the Networks to Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. Networks work collaboratively with Neighbourhood Houses Victoria on sector based issues and needs.

Neighbourhood Houses Victoria as the Peak Body is managed by a Board, which is elected by the full membership of Houses and Networks. It provides support, resources, information, advice and training to houses and centres, and acts as an advocacy and lobbying body to government. It aims to be an expression of the statewide sector of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres.

Sector Practice Diagram



Sector Outcomes

Social capital is successfully built by neighbourhood houses and learning centres through:

Community Building: To enable people to feel part of the local community in a non-discriminatory manner and empower them to be involved in and influence local community activities thus increasing the feeling of citizenship and a sense of belonging.

Lifelong Learning: To increase lifelong learning for people by providing the opportunity to gain knowledge, share skills and increase confidence. Houses and Centres provide formal and informal educational, social and employment pathways.

Well Being and Resilience: To build self-worth, well-being and resilience by supporting abilities, breaking down social barriers and raising awareness of self and inequalities impacting on people's communities.

Social Support and Networking: To provide the support structures that enable people to meet their own needs. The house or centre program provides opportunities for people to link and form relationships.

Prevention: To have a preventative role in reducing need for intensive and expensive programs by relieving isolation, loneliness, boredom anxiety and building a sense of trust, safety and belonging.

Sustainability: To enable sustainability of the local community's well-being through addressing the societal, environmental, economic, and cultural needs within that community. Houses and Centres facilitate diverse and timely responses that are cost effective.

Social Justice: To address social justice issues through awareness-raising, community education and social action.

Infrastructure: To provide a local facility that is accessible, safe and welcoming for all community members.

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