

Perspectives on Poverty: NCOSS Conference 2007

Poverty and Place: The Pursuit of a Fair and Just Society

Presentation by Denise Shearer, Manager, Social Development, Hume City Council

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this country and pay my respects to the elders both past and present.

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Hume City is approx 20 kms from Melbourne's Central business district. It is a municipality where people from many different backgrounds come together. The City benefits from the diversity within its communities - socially, culturally, spiritually, economically and educationally. Strong levels of social cohesion and sense of community is experienced in many communities in Hume City despite the high levels of disadvantage that some members face.

I will share with you today the experiences of Hume City Council - experiences which lead it to adopt a Social Justice Approach. My presentation will:

- Highlight the need as a Local Government for a combination of a Policy and Place approach in order to achieve the best outcomes for your communities;
- Introduce you to those factors which acted as precursors to Hume City's Approach – including the political framework, social dynamics and sheer commitment to make a difference.
- Argue what is the use of having a strong policy – without implementation. I will highlight some examples which have been realised through place, and finally
- Wrap up by sharing those key factors which ensured the City's firm foundations in "pursuit of a fair and just society".

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There are many approaches and actions that can be taken to address poverty. I am sure that we will be hearing of some very fine examples here today from the other speakers. The task – as pointed out by Tony Vinson and others- is long term and there are not short term quick fixes. Communities and Local Government, however, do welcome additional resources from some of the Commonwealth's funding programs such as a 4 year Communities for Children program.

What is essential is that you begin with a very strong foundation – through policy - from which you can pursue the vision of a fair and just society and influence resources for taking action in a systematic fashion. A policy approach has its advantages – for you can circumvent matters which may afflict a more pure place-based approach, such as:

- No specific areas (thus specific communities) would be favoured above others— universal outcome for the municipality
- Issues related to labelling and perpetuation of stereotypes of residents and neighbourhoods are avoided
- Policy allows for the strengthening a 'sense-of-place' rather than 'place making' — thus delving deeper into issues relating to community connectedness, sense of belonging and community pride – all of which permeates beyond physical dimensions
- A guiding framework is established which can assist in identifying areas of need, prioritising action and implementing them in a sustainable manner.

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Hume's policy approach

- is guided by concern for its most disadvantaged and marginalised members,
- values all for who they are, and,
- celebrates its diversity.

Hume City uses its policy approach to engage others so that there is a strong partnership that is relevant and responsive to communities needs, which comprehensively addresses all levels of community life. Through regular reviews and dialogue, Council ensures that its approach reflects the ever emerging needs and aspirations of its communities.

I hope, today, you will notice these elements – running like threads joining up the various initiatives and actions taken by Council on its journey in pursuit of a fair and just society.

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Local Government, as the third level of Government, is closest to the people. It is often the first port of call for the community, even though responsibility for an issue is not prima facie within its jurisdiction. This is even more so when communities face difficulties and experience high levels of disadvantage.

Hume's *Social Justice Charter* and *Bill of Rights* is a statutory responsibility for Council. You might be thinking this is a big claim. The inclusion of the Local Government Charter by the Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act in 2003 states that local government's primary objective is:

"...to achieve the best outcomes for the local community..."(Local Government Act 1989 3C(1))

The Act also provides specific detail that includes the responsibility, and ultimately the legitimacy of Local Government to consider a such an Approach through statements including:

"to promote the social, economic and environmental viability and sustainability of the municipal district" (Local Government Act 1989 3C(2)(a) and "to improve the overall quality of life of the people in the local community" (Local Government Act 1989 3C(2) (c)).

Council's decision to adopt a Rights framework was informed by the Hume's context – both the present and the past – legacies inherited from past poor public and private investment and choices.

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Hume City is a rapidly growing interface Council, with an annual population growth of 2.2% recorded between 2001 and 2006. There are significant place based challenges as we attempt to keep up with demands for additional services – particularly early childhood and sporting and recreational services.

Hume City is a culturally diverse municipality, with almost 42% (41.7%) of the population speaking a language other than English, compared to 32% (31.9%) in metropolitan Melbourne (ABS census 2006).

The City's multicultural community is also reflected in its faith, where in 2006 showed that Hume had more than 19,500 residents of Islamic faith, almost 6,000 more than

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Anglicans in our City. For example in the first two citizenship ceremonies in 2007, we have had residents from 42 different countries becoming citizens.

New arrivals to Australia, including Humanitarian entrants, often settle in Hume City with more than 2,000 (2,093) settling in the City over a 5 year period. The highest came from Iraq (85%), followed by Turkey (2.4%), and Lebanon (0.9%). New settlers in Hume under the Humanitarian stream from 2001 and 2006 represented nearly 11% of all settlers under the Humanitarian stream for metropolitan Melbourne. I am sure that I do not need to spell out the challenges for these members of our community – nor express my opinion on Minister Andrew's unhelpful recent comments.

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You may be familiar with the stereotypic views of places with concentrated disadvantage - as poor, tough and rough. There is less awareness however of the strong levels of social cohesion that exists - to quote one of our young residents:

"I think that a person that comes from [another place], that if they got to know the people it'd be different because I think that poor is just a mind thing. You might not have money, but is that what the world is all about? Come here and you'll find that most people [that] don't have money, that aren't well off, that live in places like this, have more respect for things that you don't need money for, like family and love and stuff like that."

(Tackling Poverty Together, An Inquiry into Poverty in Hume City, 2004)

The 2001 Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage ranks Hume as the 5th most disadvantaged local government area in Victoria and the 4th most disadvantaged in Metropolitan Melbourne (with an index of disadvantage Score of 954.2). Disadvantage does occur throughout the municipality - however some of our communities and suburbs are more disadvantaged than others.

The median weekly individual income in Hume City is \$403 compared with \$481 for the Metropolitan Melbourne. Great variations exist within Hume suburbs in regards to income –for example the highest average income is \$567 in Bulla – a rural township and the and lowest in Campbellfield at \$234 per week – a suburb which has a mixture of residential, retail and industrial areas. Hume City also experiences a lower proportion of young people completing year 12 – and if they do that are not likely to secure entrance to medicine or law.

Historical legacies of disadvantage do also occur within geographical locations. This is best illustrated through the Jesuit Social Services studies into disadvantage. Suburbs within Hume City have consistently been identified as areas with high levels of disadvantage. The Cumulative Disadvantage Score in their 2003 study found that the postcodes for Broadmeadows, Meadow Heights and Campbellfield were all ranked as "Disadvantaged".

The latest Jesuit Social Services study *'Dropping off the Edge'* (2007), placed postcode 3047 (Broadmeadows, Dallas, Jacana) within Band 1 of Victoria's 40 highest-ranking postcodes regards to disadvantage - and postcode 3061 (Campbellfield) within band 4 (six bands were used categories the 40 postcodes).

Our cultural diversity and the lived experiences of residents coming from refugee backgrounds heighten Hume City Council's sensitivity to human rights issues. Our relative social and economic disadvantage leads us to believe that social, cultural

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and economic rights - along with civic and political rights - are essential elements in any approach in addressing disadvantage.

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For a Rights or a Social Justice Approach to emerge in other Local Governments - there must be leadership, commitment over time and effective engagement with community.

Hume City Council has these essential ingredients, however as an Officer, I must stress that Council has provided real and significant leadership on Social Justice. Council sets policy - and social justice is a key component of the vision and therefore the policy framework. There is a dialogue between Officers and Councillors as a framework like ours is shaped – and officers need to support their intent to make a real difference with robust evidence, good words, bring the community on board and identify effective actions. Then a Local Government can make a real leap in policy and action.

Many communities with Hume City have long experienced disadvantage. In addressing social justice issues - they need to be tackled on multiple fronts in a collaborative effort –business, non government organisations and community health services. Councils need a framework in which to guide and co-ordinate such actions – including a shared understanding of Social Justice.

Bearing this in mind - it was essential that the *Social Justice Charter* was developed through a consultation process in partnership with Hume City stakeholders - through which knowledge and collective wisdom of our partners and communities could be gathered and incorporated. In consultation with the community – Council explored and developed its *Social Justice Charter* in 2001. Council also established a peak stakeholder group the Social Justice and Safe City Task Force.

Through the *Charter*, respect for each and every citizen is promoted, community participation and wellbeing is strengthened, and the causes of disadvantage are addressed. The Charter also affirms that every citizen is free and equal in dignity and in rights. However some citizens do not enjoy their rights as they should. Some citizens do not benefit from the true equality of opportunity to which they are entitled.

This was recognised by Council when it adopted its *Citizens' Bill of Rights* in 2005. The *Bill* forms a connection between - the rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other International Covenants - and Hume's residents. It also provides a platform to meet the obligations for Council of the recently introduced *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* as of 1 January 2008. Council will during November or December 2007 have a new Charter – we have engaged with the community and are in the final stages of its development.

To share briefly some of the human rights recognised in Council's Bill are the right to:

- an adequate standard of living including work and pay for a dignified life
- full development through learning throughout life
- participate in the public and cultural life of their community.
- belonging to a community to enjoy and practice that community's culture and to have that culture respected without distinction or discrimination of any kind.

These are not exclusive or exhaustive list - but those that connect with key concerns and best express aims just mentioned. Hume City is proud to be the first government

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to adopt a Citizens Bill of Rights within Australia and we are well on our journey in promoting the rights of all its citizens in all its communities. Policy does not achieve outcomes – policy needs to be applied. I will now share Hume City Council's policy being applied in place.

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For Hume City Council, incorporation of the *Bill of Rights* into the *Social Justice Charter*, was both an outcome and the beginning of a model way of working with our community, informing decisions, allocating resources and evaluating progress based on human rights principles.

Since adopting the *Social Justice Charter* and *Citizens' Bill of Rights*, Council has taken courses of action to imbed its approach into communities through their direction and assistance. It has progressively and comprehensively rolled out projects and programs, adhering to a "triple bottom lined approach" – or as some may say the "fourth pillar" approach - addressing communities' social, economic, environmental and cultural needs and issues.

The *Charter* and the *Bill* are a 'living documents' - in that they are responsive to the changing needs of communities - that responsiveness will be developed through on going dialogue between Council and communities. As a minimum the Charter will be reviewed every three years. Hume City Council is in the process of revising its *Social Justice Charter* and *Citizens' Bill of Rights* to better reflect and respond to our community's aspirations and needs. This is in addition to ensuring that Council's Bill of Rights is in alignment with the rights and responsibilities contained in the Victorian Charter, which became law in July last year. I will now share Hume City Council's policy being applied in place.

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The *Inquiry into Poverty in Hume City*, was fundamentally concerned with engaging with the community to strengthen social and economic participation. Any discussion of poverty involves questions as to what is an acceptable standard of living.

This discussion is relatively simple if everyone is considered to be the same, but more complex when the differences between groups are included. In developing strategies to increase social and economic participation - Council undertook the innovative approach of focussing upon the different perspectives of different communities regarding poverty. The project broadened and deepened Council's understanding of poverty - in particular, it explored with the community the connections between poverty and diversity and to 'build a future together'.

Involving those directed affected by poverty informed the Inquiry's research methodology – involving both quantitative (data) and qualitative research (interviews and workshops) – and I would like to acknowledge Mark Peel and John Murphy and the team at RMIT for their contribution.

The desire for respect was by far the most important theme that emerged from the Inquiry. I am sure that you are not surprised unlike my policy masters – who thought a key action would be to pursue an advocacy campaign about pension and benefits with the Australian Liberal Government.

Strategies to promote respect form the key to Council's Action Plan on Poverty, especially in supporting and strengthening community groups and leaders, and interaction between different groups, and building pathways through which different

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communities can access mainstream employment opportunities. Other action themes are employment, learning, recreation and essential support.

A key emphasis of the Inquiry was upon local issues and actions to address them, Its engagement of local communities in the identification of priority issues ensured a local focus and partnerships were concerned to recognise and build local actions.

An important local aspect was the emphasis on the local built environment. Participants made it clear that knowing that those things were cared for, meant that they were cared about, and that they were keen to be involved in the maintenance of the local environment, such as local parks. It is for this reason that the actions in relation to respect include actions in relation to the local built environment.

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The role of learning as a tool for social justice, economic development and personal wellbeing has been recognised by Hume City Council.

Learning is a key program area in Hume's Social Justice Approach, and the Hume's *Learning Together Strategy* is policy in action – through the facilitation of learning, personal growth and participation. Whilst developing the Strategy, careful consideration was taken to address the needs of the groups in the Hume community identified by the Charter – namely Indigenous community, youth, older persons, CALD and persons with addictive behaviours. Each project includes steps to encourage participation from these groups.

The *Learning Together Strategy* is the result of involving extensive consultation with stakeholders and covers all areas of learning for people of all ages. From learning in the workplace, at an educational institution, in the home or at play, Council works in partnership to encourage and support all forms of learning.

The Hume Global Learning Centre itself is a strong icon for the community. Broadmeadows did not have a library until Council spearheaded the development of the Centre. The GLC – as we call it - is close to public transport, community services and other infrastructure, and was developed through partnerships between government, the corporate sector and community. It is an example of the provision of supportive, flexible and accessible community infrastructure which is responsive to the communities' learning needs.

The timely provision of services to communities is essential for community building and strengthening. The co-location of a number of services within a new community creates the potential for increased community engagement, participation and a sense of place and community.

Another example of Council's efforts to ensure that policy is translated into place is Malcolm Creek Learning Centre where pre-school, maternal and child health service and community meeting space are provided in a community hub with a primary school, TAFE and sporting oval. Council was also instrumental in the support for learning for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – a former part of our Town Park houses the Gunung Willam Balluk (the local clan) Learning Centre.

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Dallas-Broadmeadows is one of the oldest suburban areas in the Hume City, dating from the 1950s as one of the former Housing Commission's most ambitious development projects. This high concentration of public housing creates a unique challenge for Council. The community suffers considerable socio-economic

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disadvantage, even though the area is in a very strategic metropolitan location. Dallas-Broadmeadows became the focus of urban renewal and requires leadership and a comprehensive approach.

Urban renewal is multi-faceted and involves local community and economic development, cultural enrichment, strengthening of the social fabric, as well as the more obvious physical aspects of infrastructure renewal, improved community facilities, upgrading of the public realm and property redevelopment.

Council in consultation with the community developed a plan containing action recommendations based around eight key themes:

- streetscapes and the public realm,
- open space and parklands,
- housing,
- community engagement education and technology,
- activity centres,
- community safety and cross-cultural issues,
- user-friendly access to the municipal precinct and its associated social and recreational facilities, transport and
- image change.

These actions were designed to capitalise on the area's strategic location, change the undeserved image, improve the economic position of residents, and strengthen community capacity and local pride for their area. The innovative approach to addressing disadvantage of this local area was nationally recognised when Council won an award at the Australian Local Government Awards in 2004.

The next project is part of the Urban Renewal project - which particularly showcases community involvement in strengthening their 'sense of place' and community belonging.

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The *Breeze* project was funded through a grant received from VicHealth - which fund art in public places in recognition of the value artwork has on improving community health and wellbeing.

Council explored the idea in using public artwork to brighten and beautify entrance to the Dallas Shopping Centre and in so doing also provide art that was accessible and a source of community expression and pride. The project replaced an unattractive red concrete wall at the entrance of the local shopping centre with a series of six windwalls - each decorated with a unique perforated image representing the movement of wind and water.

Council ran a unique Public Art Community Jobs Program which employed twelve local artists, who explored creative and culturally appropriate methods of consulting with the local community and engaging them in public art design and proposals.

One of those artists was commissioned to undertake the community engagement process. Through the artist's hands-on approach and knowledge of Islamic and non-Islamic art and culture - local residents who were involved were inspired and enriched their understanding of different cultures. The local community were encouraged, not only to describe their ideas and aspirations, but also to actively express them in tangible designs and colour.

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The communities' ideas and contributions are now permanently encapsulated in the vibrant metal designs of wind and water for the windwalls.

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In conclusion, I have highlighted the need as a Local Government for both a combination of Policy and Place based approaches in addressing disadvantage. Hopefully – the examples which I have provided allowed you to gain an insight in the manner in which policy can be innovatively translated into place.

The Journey undertaken by the Hume City Council shows that in order to successfully address disadvantage – a number of elements need to be present – including:

- **Leadership and commitment over time.** As an Officer of Hume City Council I must stress that Council has provided real and significant leadership on Social Justice as Councillors enabled a leap in policy development.
- effective engagement with community to keep it **relevant and responsive** to needs and aspirations. There is benefit derived when community contributions are valued.
- The resultant actions need to be **comprehensive** – incorporating a multi-faceted approach which recognises the **social, economic, environmental and cultural elements** within communities. And lastly...
- The policies and its documents must be **'living documents'**...namely they need to undergo regular review processes in order that they reflect emerging community needs and aspirations and changes in the document's contextual framework.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank NCOSS for organising this conference...and thank you for listening to the Hume Story. I would also like to thank my community, Councillors, fellow Council Officers and members of my own team for without them there would be no story.