



Victorian State Election Platform 2014 - Background Briefing

'Neighbourhood Houses: Good for individuals, communities and government'

In the lead-up to the 2014 Victorian state election, the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres (ANHLC), the peak body for Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria, calls on major and minor political parties and independents to commit to adopting three funding reforms for Neighbourhood Houses:

1. Better align funding with community demand
2. Establish a growth component in response to unmet need
3. Invest new funding in strengthening community governance.

Neighbourhood Houses are the heart of many Victorian communities. They are found in every local government area in the state. Approximately 50% of the State's Neighbourhood Houses are situated in rural/regional areas. People who participate in Neighbourhood Houses are as diverse as the communities from which they come

Evidence from a 2013 survey demonstrates that out of 47,720 Neighbourhood House participants¹:

- **20.4% identify as having a disability or long-term impairment**, compared with 18% of the population in Victoria
- **1.5% identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander**, compared with 0.9% of the Victorian population
- **18% do not have English as the primary language**, compared with 19.6% of the Victorian population
- **52% a healthcare or concession card**, compared with 23.8% of the Victorian population.

Neighbourhood Houses deliver tangible benefits at an individual and community level in relation to health and wellbeing. They enable people of all abilities, backgrounds and ages to come together, learn and support each other in a neutral environment. This is clearly documented in the 2014 report *"Multiple Benefits – How Neighbourhood Houses are good for individuals, communities and government"*.

It is well documented that spending in primary health and costly 'intervention' services can be significantly reduced through strengthening connections between individuals and their community. Success in developing social inclusion and promoting wellbeing through participation in community activities is demonstrated throughout the Neighbourhood House sector.

The proposed reforms will help Victorian communities by:

- Providing greater access to community resources, skills development, training and volunteering opportunities
- Strengthening outcomes based collaboration and partnerships, delivering on sector reform and more cost effective integrated services.
- Identifying problems and programs in terms of practical and positive solutions designed 'by communities for communities' - including communities in Victoria's 'growth corridors', regional and remote communities and those at risk or recovering from natural disasters.

¹ ANHLC publications: *Neighbourhood Houses Survey 2012* (2013); *Neighbourhood Houses Survey 2013* (2014); and *Multiple benefits – How Neighbourhood Houses are good for individuals, communities and governments* (2014). Available at ANHLC



Reform 1: Better align funding with community demand

Historically, Neighbourhood House investment has been ad hoc and inequitable. Current funding is not determined by specific criteria with a logical funding formula linked to evidence of community needs. The 2014 State Budget announcements have gone part way to addressing the anomaly of some Neighbourhood Houses in areas of high need receiving an unsustainable level of 10-15 hours paid coordination a week. The announced increase of \$0.7million is welcomed but it has been five years since there was any real growth in the program, despite the Victorian population growing by over 5.4% in the same period.

A clearer alignment between investment and community demand through the introduction of a simple and transparent funding formula would assist government strategic planning and communities. A formula that incorporates population size, level of disadvantage and rate of change in communities would assist communities across the state through:

- More people engaged in a diverse range of opportunities for social, community and economic participation
- Additional program hours targeting community priorities
- Additional programs and services supporting Neighbourhood Houses across the state (370 communities (2013) - found in every local government area across the state)
- Support for an evidence based framework to guide future policy and funding

Reform 2: Establish a growth component in response to unmet need

Mechanisms to fund establishing Neighbourhood Houses as they emerge in response to community need or to establish Neighbourhood Houses in response to community need in growth areas do not exist yet. There are at least 29 Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria not in receipt of funding, 13 of which are in Melbourne's fastest growing local government areas.

ANHLC proposes all existing funded Neighbourhood Houses be funded for a minimum of 20 hours and for a growth fund to be created that would fund up to five new Neighbourhood Houses each year, where they are compliant with the eligibility requirements. This will ensure more equitable access to services and opportunities are available to Victorians no matter where they live.

Projected operational figures for each newly established Neighbourhood House would equate to:

- Over 12,000 visitors annually
- 1,056 programmed opportunities for social, community and economic participation
- The provision of 5,800 hours of paid employment
- The facilitation of 1,770 hours of volunteering and a substantial increase in community engagement
- An increase for each community of approximately \$470,000 over and above the NHCP funding based on the evidence of current NHs success rates of leveraging additional funds

Reform 3: Invest new funding in strengthening community governance

The Neighbourhood House sector has a unique three-tiered structure. In addition to the peak body, Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres and individual Houses, the state is divided geographically into 16 regional Neighbourhood House Networks, with ten in rural and regional Victoria.

These Neighbourhood House Networks provide support to individual Neighbourhood Houses and collectively facilitate support in relation to obligations of voluntary committees of governance, especially in the areas of:

- Community governance and management responsibilities
- Facilitating reduced costs while increasing efficiencies through regional collaboration
- Facilitate government consultations with communities
- Risk Management

Resourcing of Neighbourhood House Networks is inadequate and inequitable. More remote rural Neighbourhood House voluntary committees are particularly under-resourced and therefore vulnerable. Committees are required to comply with a complex range of contractual and legal obligations. Based on the myriad of issues that are identified and resolved at NH Network level, an increase investment for regional coordination would effectively reduce the administrative burden on the Department of Human Services.