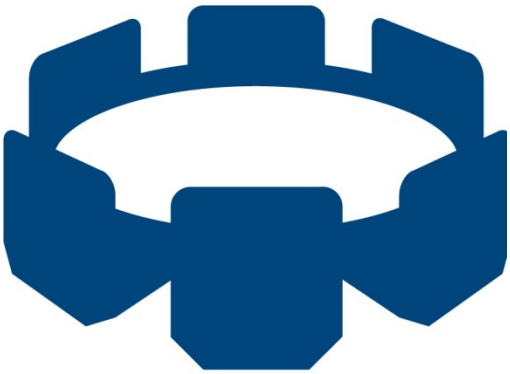

Building a strategic design capacity with community

A Report on the DHS Co-design Community Engagement Prototype

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By Don Lenihan, Ph.D

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1405-130 Albert St.
Ottawa, ON K1P 5G4
Tel: (613) 238-7160
Fax: (613) 238-7990
www.ppforum.ca

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Introduction

In December 2009, the Australian government announced the Service Delivery Reform Agenda. The goal was to improve the quality of public services by giving people more control over how they interact with government when accessing these services. Greater citizen involvement in service design was recognized as central to achieving the goal.

In May 2010, the Australian government released *Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government Administration*, which called for a new culture around service delivery based on "putting people first." To achieve this, said the *Blueprint,* government must engage citizens more directly in the planning around services.[i]

By early 2011, the Department of Human Services (DHS), the government's lead on service reform, had made "co-design" a cornerstone of its thinking on the subject. Co-design calls for a major change in how services are delivered by changing how they are designed.

In the conventional approach, government designs a service, delivers it, collects feedback from the users on how well it works, and then uses the feedback to improve the service. In this approach, users are relatively passive recipients of government services, whose feedback is gathered after the fact, usually through tools such as satisfaction surveys.

By contrast, co-design aims to transform services and their delivery by establishing a new working relationship between customers and government. Rather than simply asking them to rate their level of satisfaction, government works collaboratively with them to identify and test design options that will ensure the services work well for the users.

Co-design thus responds to the commitment to "put people first" by giving them an active and engaged role in shaping the services they receive. As a recent DHS report says:

> A co-design capability, including a methodology for practicing co-design, is being built within the department. This will provide a framework and process for the department to collaboratively engage and work with the community to understand their lives and partner with them to develop services.[ii]

So the idea of making users active partners at the design stage poses some important methodological questions. One key challenge is to build co-design into the strategic planning process for service delivery as a whole. This requires a new kind of planning process, one in which communities, government and service providers can work together to define and implement a truly collaborative strategy.

To help meet this challenge DHS recently undertook an extensive research project: the Co-design Community Engagement Prototype. The project involved a series of community dialogues on service alignment in nine municipalities in the state of Victoria. This report discusses some key findings from the project. The discussion is in three main parts:

- Part I describes the origins and conceptual basis of the Community Engagement Prototype;
- Part II discusses some of the key findings from it; and
- Part III summarizes these findings.[iii]

PART I - CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Origins of the Project and the Principal Objective

To understand the principal objective of the Co-Design Community Engagement Prototype, it is necessary to say a few words about the project's origins, which grew out of two separate, but complimentary streams of work. First, as already noted, the Australian government has been engaged in a lengthy period of serious and fertile reflection on the state of its service delivery, which led to its current interest in co-design.

The second stream involves work on a related topic—public engagement—which is underway at the Public Policy Forum (PPF) in Ottawa, Canada. The project is led by Dr. Don Lenihan, also the author of this report. In essence, the PPF's approach rests on the premise that many public policy issues have become too complex for governments to solve alone. The public have an essential role to play in finding workable solutions to such issues AND in helping to deliver the solutions. Public engagement is a methodology for making this kind of collaboration between governments, stakeholders and citizens work.[iv]

The Community Engagement Prototype was launched to test how DHS could start to apply co-design in local communities in Australia and provide opportunity to test the PPF's approach to community engagement as a possible methodology for co-designing strategic direction in service delivery.[v]

The next two sections of this study explain the conceptual basis of the PPF's approach and discuss how the Prototype was designed to test it.

Conceptual Foundations of the Prototype

The traditional view of policy-making is that it is essentially a search for the best ideas—even the "right" idea—to solve a problem or achieve a public goal. The policy process was designed to help decision-makers test ideas to find the best one.

Consider the issue of poverty. A left-leaning party might argue that poverty is the result of a lack of opportunities for education, while a right-leaning party might argue that overly generous social programs have created dependency. The policy process is designed to test the ideas by letting the two opponents publicly debate the issue to see who can win the most support. If the education side wins, resources may be channeled into creating new programs for schools. If the tough-love side wins, such programs may be dismantled or scaled back.

Policy-making has been thus a largely ***competitive*** process that aims at producing winners and losers. The basic assumption is that, in a fair fight, most of the time the best idea will win. Decisions can then be carried out by public servants, operating under the leadership of a minister. In the past, this worked reasonably well. Because issues were less complex, delivery of a policy did not require high levels of cooperation with stakeholders, communities or the general public. Government was a relatively self-contained producer of programs and services, and citizens were relatively passive consumers of them.

When it comes to complex issues like poverty today, however, this model is increasingly unworkable for two reasons—complex issues don't respond to simple solutions; and finding and implementing complex solutions requires collaboration, not competition. Here's why.

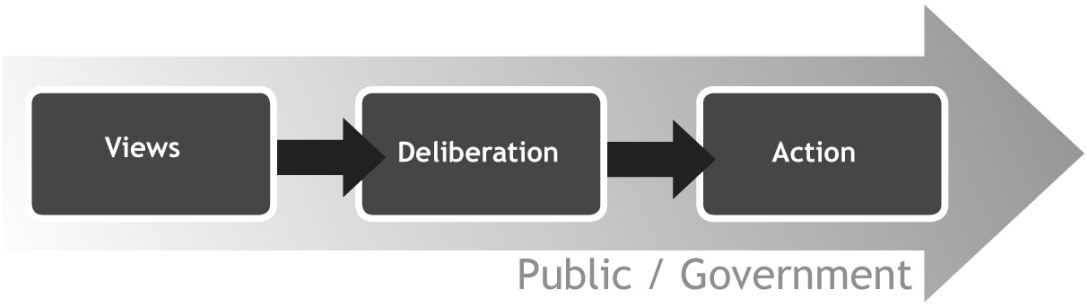
To say that poverty is complex is to say that it has multiple causes. These may include a lack of education and/or dependency—the two are hardly exclusive—but they may also include cultural or gender barriers, illness, lack of opportunity, technological change, economic shock, and a range of other things, including causes not yet recognized. Moreover, the particular cluster of causes will be different in different places. Thus the causes of homelessness in a city like Darwin will be quite different from those in Adelaide, so that a one-size-fits-all solution won't do.

The Public Policy Forum's approach to public engagement starts from the assumption that dealing with this kind of complexity effectively is not a competitive undertaking, but a ***collaborative*** one. It starts by identifying which causes are at work in which communities. Once that has been done, it goes on to identify the solutions that are appropriate to each community. Such a process is deeply collaborative in two ways:

1. Government must engage stakeholders and citizens in a dialogue to identify the key causes at play in their community. Such a process taps the community's collective experience by asking its members to explain how poverty is affecting their families, friends, neighborhoods and workplaces, and then "mapping" these causes. Every community is different and such a dialogue is a way of bringing those differences to light.

2. The solutions, like the causes, will be complex and must involve the community as a whole, not just government programs and policies. Thus families may need to support their members in new ways, businesses may need to change how they hire people, and governments may need to redesign programs. Everyone has a role to play. Unless the community as a whole is engaged, they will feel no responsibility to help deliver the solutions.

The public engagement approach meets these two conditions by creating a new kind of role for participants in the policy and service delivery processes. It casts them as partners with government by getting them to work together with government to find *and* implement solutions to complex issues. We can represent the three stages of such a process, and the respective roles played by the public and government, as follows:



In this process, all the participants, including government, begin by expressing their views on the issue. They then work through a deliberative process aimed at consolidating views and, finally, develop a joint action plan to deliver the solutions.

So everyone has a role to play, which, in turn, means that a government can't simply declare, say, that it has an anti-poverty strategy and then expect citizens and stakeholders to comply. If it wants them to participate at the action stage, it must give them a real and meaningful say in the deliberation stage when the strategy is being developed.

The Prototype

The idea that co-design could spearhead a new phase in service delivery reform is consistent with the ideas in the last section. DHS's search for a new collaborative design model that puts the customer at the centre of strategic and project planning for services is very similar to the idea that complex issues require genuine collaboration between governments, citizens and stakeholders. By the same token, DHS's efforts to draw on new techniques in "design thinking," such as "blueprinting" and "prototyping" fit well with various techniques used in the public engagement process. In particular, DHS's technique of Customer Journey Mapping, which works with users to "map" the full range of their experiences as they access a service, has much in common with the kind of "issue mapping" that participants use in public engagement to explore the policy space and identify tensions, issues and opportunities.[vi]

The Co-design Community Engagement Prototype was designed to explore and build on such complementarities, and to test how far public engagement could serve as a model for co-design of services at the strategic planning level.

The project involved a series of community dialogues in nine municipalities in the state of Victoria. Each dialogue included citizens, community organizations and local governments, as well as representatives from the federal government and state governments. In each case, up to 30 participants met at least four times to identify and discuss ways to align and improve services for selected customer groups, such as older people, working families or single parents. Each community then developed its own action plan to improve these services.

Because this was a research project, the timelines were short. All nine dialogues were launched in June 2011 and wrapped up by November 2011. The discussions therefore needed to be selective and focused. Each group was expected to make some early and important choices about where it wanted to concentrate its effort and attention.

To help them get started, DHS conducted a survey of citizens and community organizations in each of the nine communities to gather views on how well DHS services were working in the designated area. The results of the surveys were presented to the various groups and provided the points of departure for their discussions. As part of their training, the facilitators were instructed on how public engagement works.

Finally, six of the nine projects were overseen by the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and three were carried out by DHS, to allow it concentrate more fully on departmental priorities and to ensure that learning and skills-development from the process was fully captured by the department.

PART II - THE PROCESS

Setting Strategic Directions through Collaboration

Collaboration is not a new idea, especially at the community level, so we should not be surprised to learn that collaborative processes are already underway in many communities. Accordingly, MAV reports that all six communities it managed in the Prototype were already doing some kind of organized collaboration.[vii]

From this perspective, the Prototype may look like just one more community dialogue, but that would be a mistake. Most of the existing processes are led by local governments, involve mainly community service organizations (CSOs), and focus on community issues. What makes the Prototype different is its scope. The range of participants involved and the nature of the dialogue move the yardsticks on community collaboration. By bringing the three orders of government, CSOs, and residents, together within a single process, the Community Prototype was able to launch a dialogue on aligning public services that is comprehensive in a way that the other processes are not.

The participants recognized this. At the end of the project, MAV surveyed 80 of them about the process. First, there was wide agreement across the communities that the most important aspect of the process was bringing all these players to the table. As a result, 81% of the respondents found that the process involved more collaboration than usual, 94% reported that they had made significant new contacts, and 66% thought the outcomes achieved through their action plan were very usable. 62% wanted the process to continue without change. Almost no one thought it should be terminated.

So the Prototype was not just another exercise in solving local problems. It broke new and promising ground by opening a dialogue on how to align the perspectives of a wide range of participants. **As such, the Prototype constitutes a critical first step toward DHS's goal of setting the strategic direction for public services through co-design.**

Still, this was only a first step. As the findings below show, the quality of the dialogue and the action plans varied across the communities. If progress was made, there is still a long way to go. The good news is that, as a first step, the Prototype was a success and it has some important lessons to offer for the future. For the purposes of this discussion, we can organize the findings under four headings:

1. The Participants
2. The Dialogue
3. The Action Plans
4. Looking Ahead

The Participants

During the project planning phase, there was some uncertainty over how or even if ordinary citizens—i.e. residents—should be directly involved in the process. While everyone agreed this was desirable in principle, some worried that involving residents for four or five full-day sessions might be too much. Residents might not be willing to devote that much time to the process or, even if they were, they might find they had little to say after the first session or two.

Some of the planners therefore suggested that participation be restricted to government officials and community service providers—at least during this first round of dialogue. However, others disagreed. They argued that the whole point of the process was to test a more bottom-up approach to service improvement. Without any residents at the tables, they said, the project would be hugely compromised. They felt residents should be involved throughout.

In the end, planners opted for a compromise. They agreed there should be one or even two opening sessions in which all residents would be invited to assemble and give their views—so-called "residents' sessions." Any residents who wished could then volunteer to sign-on for the CSO sessions. This allowed any resident to have a say without having to make too big a commitment, while still ensuring that those who wanted to participate fully were free to do so. It also ensured that the voice of residents was present throughout the process.

In keeping with this, the six sessions organized by MAV began with one or even two residents' sessions, which observers widely agreed were very helpful in setting the tone for the whole dialogue and identifying key community concerns.

A variation on the model was attempted at the DHS-led session in Dandenong. The group decided to hold a residents' session in the middle of the four stakeholder sessions, to give residents an opportunity to provide input into the more technical and/or operational discussions of the CSOs, as it was evolving. It didn't work very well. The CSOs' discussion had progressed to a point where residents found it difficult to participate in a way that was informed, consistent and productive. Their interventions tended to disrupt the conversation, rather than enhance it. Residents' sessions appear to work best at the beginning and, possibly, the conclusion of the process.

As for the decision to allow residents to participate in all the sessions, quite a few accepted the offer. Observers say this worked very well and that **having residents at the table played a key role in helping to create the right dynamic for collaboration**, in the following way.

Planners of dialogue processes often worry that the discussion will degenerate into a talk-fest or whining session or get hi-jacked by special interests. In some of the early DHS sessions, there were moments when it seemed this might happen. Some CSOs seemed to want to use the meeting to tell government officials what's wrong with their services and/or pitch them on the CSOs' preferred solutions.

In fact, this is how many CSOs approach traditional consultation processes. In such a process, government invites the public to appear before officials and present their views on the issues under discussion. Government then weighs what it hears and decides whether or how far it will act on the advice.

Consultation thus is NOT the same as collaboration; it does not aim at getting organizations to work together to solve common issues. Rather, it is an opportunity for organizations and residents to have input into a government decision-making process and, possibly, influence the decisions government will make.

In the early stages of the DHS sessions, some of the CSOs didn't seem to fully appreciate—or perhaps didn't believe—that the Prototype was going to be a collaborative process. Their first impulse was to go into "consultation mode" and begin criticizing government and advocating for their preferred solutions.

Old habits die hard. The challenge this presented for the facilitator, we heard, was to get these stakeholders re-focused on the task of collaborating.

Residents proved to be a major asset here. Facilitators from both the DHS and MAV sessions noted how **residents tended to act as a check on bureaucratic digressions and logjams**. They noted a dramatic difference in the outlook and behavior of CSOs when residents were present. Stakeholders stopped using jargon, became more open and flexible about their views, and made a concerted effort to work together to arrive at collaborative decisions.

For their part, residents seemed to adjust to this moderator-type role very well. They listened attentively and inserted themselves when they felt officials were getting off track or ignoring their concerns. Their presence helped bring agencies to attention and kept things moving forward. Having residents involved in the dialogue thus proved to be a very constructive force for getting the dialogue on track and keeping it there.

We should not to tar all CSOs with the same brush. If at first some tended to go into consultation mode, this was the exception, not the rule. We've already seen that most communities have collaborative processes underway and CSOs are usually major players in them. They know a lot about collaboration. They are important service providers in the community who, like governments, have a real interest in ensuring that their services avoid overlap and duplication, are well aligned to get maximum benefit, and serve genuine and important community needs.

Far from being difficult**, for the most part, CSO participation in the Prototype was business-like and professional**. CSOs showed that they know how to collaborate responsibly and, given the chance, want to work with all three levels of government.

The Dialogue

Traditional policy-making tends to take a one-size-fits-all approach to issues. Such solutions are usually wanting for the simple reason that every community is different. By pushing decision-making down to the local level, the Prototype was supposed to let participants review federal and state services from a local perspective, consider how they do or don't align with local services, and discuss what changes are needed in the whole complement of services to better meet local needs.

This doesn't mean CSOs were free to eviscerate federal or state policies and services. It meant they had an opportunity to discuss them with federal and state officials to see whether or how adjustments might be made for local circumstances. **One of the great strengths of a community approach is that it allows governments and CSOs to work together to make adjustment for local circumstances**.

Perhaps surprisingly, some facilitators reported having difficulty getting such a dialogue going in their sessions. In Benalla, for example, the facilitator found that the group tended to keep wandering away from its focus on federal services and into a discussion of local issues.

According to one observer, this was the result of a strong and articulate local government presence in the dialogue. The Benalla & District Community Task Force, which was convened by local government, is a local, collaborative initiative that has gained real prominence in the community on a range of issues. The work from this initiative had a strong influence on the Prototype discussion.

The good news is that Benalla eventually found its stride. As it did, collaboration became vibrant and a strong sense of mutual respect formed among the participants. The group focused on some key issues, set priorities and identified ways to respond to them. Stakeholders came together to share knowledge and identify champions on the issues.

On reflection, however, this alleged lack of focus returns us to a basic question about the dialogue. **What, exactly, was it supposed to achieve? In fact, throughout the life of the Prototype, there was some confusion or even ambivalence about this**. On one hand, everyone agreed that the Prototype aimed at the two following goals:

1. Allow participants to take a holistic approach to aligning services at the local level.

2. Gather information on how to improve DHS services within the various communities.

On the other hand, people sometimes differed on which goal had priority. This is not a small matter. In fact, their order makes a huge difference to the kind of dialogue the group is supposed to be having. Consider the following.

If the first priority is to take a holistic approach, "service improvement" will be defined by reference to the needs of the community as a whole. Those needs will be defined through the dialogue process. Improvement will result from adjusting various clusters of services to get a tighter fit between them, on one hand, and community needs, on the other. The task of the dialogue will be to consider the needs and the complement of services available and then ask how the services can be adjusted to fit together better—to *align* them—so they serve the needs more effectively.

By contrast, if the priority is to improve DHS services, the dialogue will be more narrowly focused. In this case, the key point of reference is not the needs of the community as a whole; rather, it is the goal the service is supposed to achieve. Accordingly, the task of the dialogue will be to identify and explore ways to make federal services work more effectively within the community environment, while still achieving their goals. This may or may not include better alignment with other services but, if it does, this alignment will be incidental. It is not the primary goal of the dialogue.

So, in a nutshell, the difference is that **the holistic approach is more comprehensive and aims primarily at alignment of a diverse range of services, while the DHS-centred approach is more narrowly focused on finding ways to improve federal services.**

This report takes the view that alignment should be the first priority of the Prototype. Alignment is the main reason for bringing such a diverse group of participants together. It cannot be achieved from the top-down. No one is in a position to force all the other players to conform to its priorities and standards. If we want alignment, collaboration is essential.

This is not to say that a narrower focus on improving DHS services is unimportant. It is a worthy goal, but it is already being effectively pursued through a range of other techniques around co-design, such as blueprinting and Customer Journey Mapping. A process like the Prototype will add little to this work. **The real value of the Prototype lies in its ability to move the dialogue up to a more strategic level** where diverse governments and organizations can work together to arrive at a common understanding of their respective tasks. **Such a dialogue is essential if DHS really wants to pursue the goal of setting strategic directions for services through co-design**.

Now, if there was some confusion over the goals of the project, participants seemed to have sorted this out through the dialogue. They seemed to recognize that the real opportunity the process created was for better alignment. And we see clear indications of this kind of alignment in the action plans.

For example, in the Benalla plan there is a section on transportation that calls for a survey to clarify local needs and proposes to shift from using a larger to a smaller bus, which could be able to make more frequent runs and thus serve the community better. The plan calls for a closer working relationship between the state Department of Transport and Benalla in order to pursue such goals more effectively.

In the city of Dandenong, recent refugees often don't have appropriate proof of identity documents to access private rental accommodation through real estate agents. The action plan calls on DHS and local organizations to meet with local agents and the Victoria Real Estate Association to ensure a better understanding of requirements of process, identity points, guarantors, and barriers. The expectation is that if they all sit down together they can and will find ways to address the problem in a way that accommodates everyone's needs.

In the Corio action plan, a shortage of affordable housing is seen as having close connections with other issues, such as mental health and literacy. Dealing with housing in isolation is thus a formula for failure. Participants call for a more holistic approach to the problem. This, in turn, requires that all three orders of government come to the table, along with stakeholders and residents, so that there can be a single, comprehensive discussion of how to solve housing issues in their community.

In all three examples, implementation of the action will involve, first, identifying key connections between issues, gaps in services, tensions between goals, and opportunities; and, second, deciding how the various players can take advantage of these findings to adjust their services to get a better fit. All of this will take place against the backdrop of a discussion about the needs of the community as a whole.

The Action Plans

In the end, **the only real reason to engage in a process like the Prototype is because it leads to better outcomes. This, in turn, comes down to action**. The process is supposed to generate collective action that produces results we would not get without the process. It allows us to respond to complex issues by coordinating action among governments, stakeholders and citizens. So, although dialogue plays a critical role in the process, talk is not enough. The action plans are the critical output from the process. How well did the process do on this front?

Unsurprisingly, **some action plans are better than others**. The action plan from Benalla, for example, is imaginative, but practical, relatively wide ranging and very collaborative. By comparison, the action plans from Epping and Fountain Gate look somewhat weak. Why? A few things stand out.

In Epping, CSO participation was mainly delegated to junior staff, which made it difficult to get commitments to real action. As a result, the action plan tends to be more about internal processes and planning than changing how services are delivered. This reflects the participants' inability to make commitments beyond a willingness to try to work together more collaboratively in the future or to engage senior decision-makers from their own organization in the project.

The Fountain Gate action plan also seems focused more on process than action. In addition, it relies heavily on DHS as the lead agency, so that, as a plan, it feels a little more top-down than bottom-up. A key reason seems to be the Community Futures Project, a highly successful collaborative initiative in Epping. Because community service providers and government departments were already engaged in discussion of some of these issues, some observers thought the Prototype may have seemed like duplication to key stakeholders. As a result, Epping was unable to generate the same level of buy-in from key CSOs as, say, Benalla.

Residents from Epping were also slow to take ownership of solutions, even though the session began with two citizens' forums. There were reports that the issues were too broad and that people easily got lost in the discussion. If so, there are likely important lessons here about how the discussion should be framed in future. (See Section 7) Perhaps this is also connected to the low level of public awareness around services in Epping.

Notwithstanding all this, it would be a mistake to conclude that either Epping or Fountain Gate were unsuccessful. Closer analysis would likely turn up lots of other reasons why these dialogues were less energetic than others, many of which might be easily addressed through better planning. For example, observers agree that the planners and organizers for the dialogues did not have adequate lead time to recruit the right participants or build the right relationships with key players. Simply extending the lead time for recruitment and planning might make a major difference in the future.

Moreover, in both cases, participants strongly affirmed their belief in the need for a collaborative process of this sort. In Epping, the cornerstone of the action plan explicitly states that Epping has "no coordinated or collaborative approach to identifying needs, gathering local demographic and service data or being well informed through community engagement."

In the MAV Survey, Fountain Gate participants identified collaboration as the key outcome, no one ticked the box that described the process as "disappointing," and everyone was at least hopeful that the action plan would be implemented.

The point here is that **we need to keep the action plans in perspective**. The Prototype process was breaking new ground. Judgments on its success are bound to be spotty, difficult and impressionistic. Although we certainly need to look at the action plans, this is not the only thing that matters. It is worth pausing here to remind ourselves of why we are interested in collaboration, in the first place.

As we saw in Section 3, complex issues cannot be resolved by government alone. It requires the participation of citizens, stakeholders and communities working together. First and foremost, **collaboration is about building the relationships needed to make this happen. But the capacity to work together this way requires trust and mutual understanding. Building this relationship is a critical condition for collaborative action**.

In evaluating cases like Epping or Fountain Gate, first of all, we should be asking whether the process made a significant contribution to building such a relationship. Insofar as it did, this is an important gain, even if the action plan is weak. Action will come in time, but only as the relationships mature. First and foremost, **the Prototype should be seen as an investment in relationship-building**. But for this to make sense, the project as a whole must be seen as an ongoing effort whose real goals will not be achieved in a single round.

Looking Ahead

Most participants saw the process as the first step in a longer journey. **No one thought the issues could be solved in a single round**. Indeed, participants agreed that they had barely scratched the surface. So, if the process were to continue for some time, what might we expect to see in the longer term?

Although the Prototype focused on services, community dialogues like these would not remain there for long. They would quickly work their way back into the bigger policy issues behind the services. For example, discussions about community health initiatives would lead to discussions of health care reform; concerns over recycling or landfill sites would raise the issue of climate change; and so on. This would be a natural evolution of the discussion. However, backing into the policy issues this way would change how they are discussed.

The views of community members would be shaped by the dialogue process, which requires that they listen, learn, make compromises, weigh alternatives, and set priorities—and that they do this together. Moreover, all this takes place in the context of a very practical discussion of how to improve services to meet local needs. Finally, this discussion would include federal and provincial/state officials, who would be sharing their perspectives.

The long-term result of such a dialogue should be a far more informed public discussion, a gradual alignment of policies and views across the community and the three levels of government, and a much better balance between competing views and objectives.

Community processes like those in the Prototype thus offer a new and very promising way to engage the public on bigger policy issues, such as climate change or health care reform, because they allow the participants to come at them from the bottom-up, through reflections on services. This, in turn, leads to a policy discussion that is cohesive, practical and grounded in local needs and perspectives.

Participants and observers seemed to get this. They felt the dialogues in the Prototype were off to a very promising start. If federal and state governments remain involved, they said, a real partnership could evolve, based on learning, mutual respect, mutual interest, and trust. This new set of relationships would make possible real and lasting progress on complex goals, such as a healthy community or a sustainable economy.

It is safe to say that, by the time a process completed two or three cycles of discussion, most communities would have worked their way into the bigger policy issues lying behind services. Furthermore, **as the dialogue progressed, there would almost certainly be opportunities to bring the results into bigger forums and to align or integrate community action plans with other emerging plans.** This possibility was already being discussed in some of the communities.

For example, there was much talk in Epping about bringing the findings of the Prototype to the Community Futures Project. The Benalla group was discussing opportunities to further develop their action plan through cooperation with the Task Force. **There could also be ways to feed into larger structures, such as the Regional Management Forums or even COAG**.

So, from the longer term perspective, not only will the quality of the action plans improve, there should be a more informed public discussion, a gradual alignment of policies and views across the community

and the three levels of government, and a much better balance between competing views and objectives.

This returns us to the principal goal of the Community Prototype, which we said in Section 2 was "to test…community engagement as a possible methodology for co-designing strategic direction in service delivery."

Setting strategic directions for service delivery requires a comprehensive discussion of needs, resources and priorities. This requires that the key players are at the table. It also means that no single government or organization can own the process. It must be a collaborative undertaking.

The best way to do this is through a community approach. The public has strong sense of membership in and commitment to their communities. They already have highly localized programs on a wide range of issues. People are passionate about their communities and often willing to get involved at this level in a way they may not in bigger discussions.

The Prototype positions Australia as a leader in a new and very important phase of service delivery reform. There is a lot to learn and a long way to go, but this is a promising start**. Although the project should be reviewed and possibly adjusted, it would be a mistake not to continue it**. Indeed, it would be an unfortunate retreat into the past. This kind of strategic alignment is emerging as a priority around the world. There is no realistic way for DHS to meet the goals of its co-design approach without it. Efforts to make progress on strategic directions will quickly hit a wall.

PART III - SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

1. **Complex issues are ones that government cannot solve alone**, such as poverty, community health or climate change. Solutions to issues such as these require the participation of stakeholders, communities and citizens. Everyone has a role to play.

2. **Collaboration** is a where organizations and people with common interests work together to achieve a common goal.

3. **Collaboration is not about giving away power**. In a collaborative relationship, everyone still makes their own decisions, but they commit to doing so by sitting down together to discuss the issues and options. Everyone, including government, is expected to listen to the others, try to find common ground and make reasonable compromises, so that decisions can be made together. In a collaborative process, it is the facilitator's job to ensure everyone plays by the rules.

4. **Collaboration and codesign works.** The Prototype shows that CSOs and residents are willing to play by such rules. They took their roles seriously, engaged in productive discussions, and avoided the kind of theatrics that terrify officials. Concerns over bad policy decisions, policy conflict, and so on were misplaced. Participants were skillful at identifying and focusing on local issues in a practical way.

5. **Setting strategic directions through co-design is a collaborative task**. It requires a comprehensive dialogue that examines community needs from a holistic perspective and aims to align services to meet them as effectively as possible.

6. **Collaboration at the community level is not new.** There are already lots of community-based, collaborative initiatives underway in Australia and elsewhere, but most are narrower in focus than the Prototype. In terms of the Prototype's goal of aligning strategic directions, these initiatives provide a robust foundation to build on.

7. **Having residents at the table makes a real difference**. The presence of residents in the process helps discipline the discussion between stakeholders and governments, encourages them to be more open and accommodating, and helps to prevent bureaucratic log-jams.

8. R**esidents' sessions are a good way to launch a community discussion**, but they should come at the beginning or, possibly, the end of the process.

9. **The process will improve with experience:** Participants and observers agreed that repetition and experience would lead to significant improvement in the quality of the dialogues and action plans. If the process is repeated a few times, participants and process managers will learn a lot about the process. As a result, they will have a much better idea what to expect and will build long-term relationships with key players from the communities. Other community networks will also become aware of the process and be drawn into it; senior managers in CSOs will have more confidence in the process and be more willing to invest time and resources.

10. **The dialogue must be ongoing:** The long-term goal of the community approach is not just to solve a problem, but to build a new kind of working relationship—a genuine partnership—between the participants. As this relationship develops, they will come to understand one another better, they will begin to share a common way of speaking about the issues, and they will develop new ways of working together. Their discussions will become more focused, disciplined and productive. As a result, they will also become more trusting of one another and more willing to make adjustments and compromises to reach solutions.

11. **Building trust is essential:** Without trust between the players, the dialogue will stall. Effective collaboration requires openness and a willingness to take ownership. Participants will only take ownership and discuss their perspectives openly if they must trust others around the table to do the same. Building trust is thus a critical success condition of collaboration. First and foremost, the process should be designed to achieve this.

12. **The right participants must be at the table:** Having the right people at the table is critical. This does not mean the most senior people in an organization. It means that the participants must be well positioned to speak to their organization's interest in the subject, its ability to contribute to the action plan, and have the authority to make such commitments or to have them approved quickly.

13. **There should be continuity in the participation:** Having the same people throughout the dialogue is very important. Constant changes or rotation in participants makes it very difficult of the discussion to move forward. New participants are forced to try and catch up to the rest of the group.

14. **Group size matters**: Although observers did not agree on an optimal number of participants for such a dialogue, there was general agreement that if the sessions get too big, it becomes difficult to have a real exchange. If there are too small, it gets hard to find solutions that really solve problems. A good number seems to be around 25 participants.

15. **Ensure adequate time for planning:** A common criticism of the process was that it was rushed. There was not enough time to plan the process well, fully train the facilitators, or recruit the right participants. The timelines for completing the process were also too short. This constrained outcomes and prevented the development of more meaningful relationships between participants. Any future process should provide a longer planning period and more time to carry out the process.

16. **Research and develop new dialogue techniques:** Serious research into the kinds of techniques needed to support the process is needed and DHS should invest in such research to support future dialogues.

17. **Facilitation should be standardized and skills developed:** Some observers felt that there should be a common approach to facilitation.

18. **The state government must be fully engage**d: Although officials from the state government were involved in most dialogues, observers report that buy-in from that government was relatively low. The expectation is that, should these processes continue, state government departments would quickly recognize the need to be fully engaged in the dialogue. DHS should make a concerted effort to engage state governments in future rounds.

19. **The business community must be engaged:** Local business communities played at best a minor role in these dialogues. Nevertheless, the action plans already contain signs of the important role that businesses are likely to play in future dialogues. In areas such as housing, transportation or community health, the action plans are already looking turning to the private sector to help find solutions. As the process matures, the involvement and role of the private sector will grow. They need to be at the table in future rounds.

20. **DHS's commitment to co-design at the strategic level requires community engagement**, along the lines of the Prototype.

21. **Linking up with other forums is a highly desirable goal:** The longer-term goals of the Prototype will likely lead to a closer working relationship between community dialogues and other existing policy and service delivery forums. MAV and some communities have indicated their willingness to take a leadership role in helping to establish these connections.

ENDNOTES

[i] The publication is available for download at: http://www.dpmc.gov.au/publications/aga_reform/aga_reform_blueprint/index.cfm

[ii] *Service Delivery Reform: Transforming government service delivery*," an update on progress on service delivery reform, published by the Department of Human Services, 2011, which is available at: http://www.humanservices.gov.au/spw/corporate/about-us/resources/service-delivery-reform-overview.pdf

[iii] The analyses and findings in this report are based on a number of key sources, including:

- The author's own work on public engagement
- A series of workshops and presentations given by the author to DHS staff and other officials in the Australian government during the project development phase
- Workshops and presentations given by the author (organized by the Municipal Association of Victoria) to officials from local governments in Victoria and the State of Victoria
- Discussions between the author and departmental staff at various stages of the project's development and implementation
- Interviews with the facilitators of the dialogue sessions
- Discussions with a variety of participants in the dialogue sessions
- Attendance at some dialogue sessions
- A review of DHS documents on co-design
- A review of documents from the project, including the action plans

A quick word on terminology is in order here. The findings draw heavily on exchanges with "observers" of the process. The term refers to a fairly large collection of people who were involved in the process, but not as participants. This group includes the process planners, facilitators, managers and organizers.

[iv] See *Rescuing Policy: The Case for Public Engagement*, by Don Lenihan, 2012 Public Policy Forum. The e-version of the book can be downloaded free of charge at http://www.ppforum.ca/rescuing-policy

[v] Earlier efforts to bring these ideas together are described in "Co-Design: Toward a New Service Vision for Australia?" by Don Lenihan and Lynelle Briggs, published in *Public Administration Today*, January – March 2011. The article is also available for download at: http://www.humanservices.gov.au/spw/corporate/publications-and-resources/resources/co-design-toward-a-new-service-vision-for-australia.pdf

[vi] See *Rescuing Policy*, Chapter 2.

vii At the end of the process, the Municipal Association of Victoria conducted a survey of participants about the process. The results are available from MAV.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