The importance of community conversation: building a community communication system

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

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Declaration

I certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Gillian Miles
June 2011
The importance of community conversation is dedicated to Maureen Miles (1944 – 2007) my beloved mother, who loved to understand and expected that her children would follow in her footsteps of lifelong learning.
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2011
Abstract

The importance of community conversation explores the characteristics of community building and engagement activities as understood and applied in some organisations by senior representatives in the Victorian Public Service. Whilst the focus is on organisations, the broader community building and social capital agenda is explored through theoretical literature and empirical data. The community communication model offers future direction for addressing the gap in symbolic and systemic communications as a fundamental component of community development activity.

This thesis is an attempt to selectively use elements of three distinct constructs to provide an explanation of the way in which the community building narrative in Victoria has been explored. Elements of interpretivism, structuration and semiotic theory have been utilised in an attempt to create a methodology to understand that that community conversations can occur. This eclectic approach is referred to as the paradigmatic architecture throughout the text. The construction of a community communication model is created through the framework emerging from the architecture and the explicit use of semiotics as an approach to deconstruction and reconstruction.

The body of work was guided by two research questions:

What are the understandings of senior representatives from government agencies regarding community building and its
application within their organisation and more broadly across government?

Do gaps emerge from the theoretical literature and empirical body of knowledge on community building and its logic?

The importance of community communication introduces a paradigmatic framework in which to apply the knowledge of community building in two portfolios within the Victorian Public Service. The portfolios of Environment and Transport were selected by the researcher as they appeared to have existing arrangements in place to work with communities and they are both complex organisations with high-profile outputs. Additionally, the researcher had a working knowledge of some parts of each portfolio.

The empirical data was generated through deep peer-constructed conversations with senior representatives in the state bureaucracy, and the theoretical data through a wide ranging review of community development, social capital building and semiotic literature. The research juxtaposes key elements of Interpretivism, structuration and semiotic theories to build the narrative of the community building agenda being implemented in parts of the Victorian public service. The ontologies of the research paradigm and two theories used to generate data and build the narrative of community conversation are subtly different but aligned, as together they recognise that the construction of social reality is created by individuals and their collective monitoring and adaptation of social structures. The actions of social behaviour are a consequence of social
structures, yet modify and change structures and produce a negotiated social reality for individuals.

The data generated by the in-depth conversations have been thematically arranged around five key concepts in order to build the narrative of the community conversation. Exploration of the data revealed that there was limited application of community building in the context of a reform agenda, the changing nature of government business and a focus on organisational design as a consequence of the needs of communities.

Findings from the research include three main points: the logic for community strengthening in the two portfolios has not been consistently applied; the reform of government business is not intellectually contextualised by an understanding of social capital; and communication is not recognised as a foundation principle in policy or practice.

The gap which emerges from both the theoretical and empirical data seems to be recognising that systemic communication is a key factor for the success of relationships between government departments and communities. In the empirical data generation activity, the exploration of communications indicated a functional approach to communication that is both unsophisticated and a non-systemic design factor in community building.

The researcher proposes a response to the inconsistent application of community building and the limited system-based thinking on communications through the generation of the community communication model. Taking social
communication as a foundation principle, the model is an attempt to bring together the process of making meaning in public places and community development methods, to provide guidance in the design of community relationships.

Within the context of the three constructs described in the formation of the paradigmatic architecture, the argument of the thesis utilises the following logic;

- Semiotics considers action to be socially constructed and when juxtaposed with interpretivism and structuration enables an explanatory architecture to be theorised
- The paradigmatic architecture can be used as a methodology to explore cultural constructions, and in this instance community engagement
- The analysis of community building through using a community communication model can address gaps in the current understanding and implementation of community building activity.

This thesis commences the building of a community communication model. The model clearly needs additional refinement as well as testing and application in an operational environment. The model serves as the starting point for additional research into government attempts at community building and as a conceptual framework for practitioners to explore as they continue to search for innovation in generating social capital.
Chapter 1
Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the thesis
This chapter provides a broad overview of the landscape in which the narrative of community building exists by providing a brief historical overview, some insight into government directions and policies, and an indication of responses by organisations involved in community building. Through this introduction, the researcher also attempts to provide some thinking on the future and how theory applies in the workplace in government organisations.

1.1.1 Background of the researcher
At this point in the discussion, it seems important to understand the professional context in which the researcher sits, as much of the work undertaken for this thesis is a consequence of activity in the workplace. After working at senior levels in the Victorian Public Service for over twenty years, the researcher’s knowledge was vital in understanding the policy drivers and having access to the individuals included in the scope of the research.

The researcher has undertaken senior management and leadership roles in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment and VicRoads, and has most recently held the position of Deputy Secretary in the Departments of Planning and Community Development and Transport. In these positions, the researcher has led organisational change and reform with a focus on community building.
and business improvement. At DPCD she had a leadership role for continuing the development of policy and programs for the continued implementation of community building activities throughout the public service in Victoria.

1.2 Policy context

In 2004 the Victorian Government created the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) with the objective of leading an agenda across government that was focussed on strengthening communities. The policy framework was a direct response to issues raised in the 1999 state election, when the outgoing Liberal government was heavily criticised for losing connection with communities.

The new social policy agenda sat well with Labor Party ideology, as it sought to gain traction on place-based investment and whole-of-government approaches to addressing social disadvantage. Through DVC a range of government driven social programs were drawn together in order to integrate thinking and the application of key community building principles. The integration of population groups, sport and community-based activities in one departmental structure was intended to ensure the alignment of community aspiration and agency program design.

In 2007 Yehudi Blacher explained the design of DVC:

As a Department of State, DVC is relatively unique in that it has been established not around function (such as health or education) but around three core ideas:

- the importance of strong communities to achieving public policy outcomes
- that this is best done by focussing agency attention at the very local level
- recognising that delivery on these objectives will require the public sector to re-think the way it operates; to move from a traditional hierarchical model to one characterised by multi-sectoral partnerships through which local communities
The design of DVC provided a new way of delivering the business of government in partnership with communities. *A Fairer Victoria* (DPCD, 2009) provided the overarching direction for a whole of government approach to addressing disadvantage and sought to establish community building as a key concept across government.

In Australia, relationships between government and community are undertaken at local, state and federal levels, each following a trajectory that has some connection with the others. The three levels of government provide additional complexity for the potentially engaged community, as there are numerous funding opportunities available for investment at the local level. The objective of achieving community connectedness in Australia is contextualised from the government perspective, as a governance reform agenda which seeks to increase participatory governance arrangements while building social capital (Adams & Hess, 2010; Considine, 2001).

Within government departments, some senior officials are seeking to fulfil the institutional reform agenda by using community engagement strategies to build relationships within the bureaucratic environment. Government representatives question whether they should engage on the basis of communities of interest, place-based communities, or both. Timing around engagement is a difficult issue for bureaucrats, as they seek to manage political and interdepartmental activities in order to achieve acceptable outcomes to satisfy communities and investors (usually government). Representatives in the public sector are often wary of

*have an enhanced capacity to shape directions, set priorities and even control resources.* (Blacher, 2007).
connection with communities, as it can provide a focus for objection or dissent and results on the ground are difficult to quantify in a short time period. Undertaking public debate with communities can be a testing activity for a politician. The continual gaze of the public, particularly through the media, can produce a volatile environment in which to find solutions to often historical problems.

Coordinating the relationship on the ground has seen modern policy solutions implemented across multiple agencies to achieve an outcome to solve a complex community issue. An integrated response from government often provides communities with sound investment strategies. Regional structures in a number of portfolio areas have helped facilitate local decision making and in building a stronger, joined up relationship with communities.

Across the country, the policy agenda for community strengthening (or more recently the Commonwealth social inclusion agenda) is closely aligned but not dependent on achieving participatory governance outcomes. Stronger communities can be achieved through increased community governance arrangements but, more often than not, the communities of interest dissipate once immediate community objectives have been achieved. The Victorian Government’s Community Building Initiative is seen to be delivering results through inclusive and resilient governance arrangements established locally to determine priorities and focus communities on outcomes. The gap between policy aspiration and practical delivery is clearly marked by the limited understanding in some government departments of the community strengthening objectives and adequate application within the business.
The creation of the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) in 2007 added a stronger spatial and land-use focus to the agenda of building communities. Adding the land-use planning function to the community agenda was the vehicle for strengthening the logic around community investment. The agenda was broadened beyond disadvantaged communities to those experiencing change – climatic, demographic and industry adjustment as examples.

Through DPCD the government was able to focus heavily on areas of growth in Victoria, including the metropolitan fringe of Melbourne and regional centres such as Geelong, Bendigo, Ballarat and broader areas such as Gippsland to target tree-change and sea-change belts. This preventative approach sees both community strengthening and spatial integrity as key elements of a liveable community and that planning for them reduces government intervention at a later date. Engaging with future residents to consider the spatial construct of a community provides similar opportunity to the way in which infrastructure projects have been the catalyst for community engagement in numerous communities.

The place-based approach represents a shift from a universal systems response by government to a locally driven, partnership and investment arrangement between communities and government agencies (Considine, 2001). Fundamental to the objectives of community strengthening are beliefs in relationship, in communication and in public discourse.
1.3 **Changing the way government works**

The way in which government currently works is changing significantly as community engagement activities are systematically adopted throughout the bureaucracy and where building social capital in communities is validated as key government business. Adoption of the principles of community building – localism, capacity building, communication and partnership (Adams & Hess, 2010) – will be the drivers for organising relationships within government, and between government and the external world, and the framework which guides the way in which the business of government is undertaken.

Again, Blacher succinctly captures the change drivers for government:

> The renewed international interest in communities is largely a response to the uncertainties created by rapid economic, social and technological change – people are increasingly looking to their communities for a sense of identity, well-being and security. (Blacher, 2007).

In order that community strengthening is treated as a key output by government departments, the measures of success need to be clearly explored and articulated within the core deliverables of the business of agencies of government. Embedding community engagement as a method of operating may enhance the way in which departments deliver their business, to achieve greater communication and community connectedness. Community engagement delivers at the process level as well as achieving community benefits through outcomes that are achieved at the local level. The process of engagement starts the progression of building social capital, as facilitated activity occurs with social actors engaged in making meaning in public places.
To achieve improved community benefits through utilising community engagement as part of building social capital, the way in which government works needs to be more adaptive, open to relationship and measure outputs in a holistic or place based context.

As Australia moves towards a more open and participatory governance model for government, the complex and elusive concept of strengthened communities needs to be better understood by all social actors engaged in the process. Improved understanding of communication systems as fundamental to relationship building and community strengthening can be achieved by unpacking and rebuilding the community communication system and its role in the community engagement agenda.

Currently the community strengthening agenda in the Victorian Public Service is viewed as the role of the social and community portfolios, as they work closely with a range of communities. In order to better understand the outcomes of community strengthening activities, including their role in participatory governance, a more sophisticated understanding of relationship and social communication is required. The simple notions of community engagement and consultation, the more complex public participation and formal decision making structures, and the new concepts of community governance can be seen to be played out on two levels of social communication – the semiotic and mimetic planes (Hodge & Kress, 1988). Greater understanding and agreement on the relationship mode between government departments and community could add significant clarity to the aspirational outcomes to be achieved through well established partnership arrangements.
There is a reform agenda inherent to social capital building and the methods of building communities. Sharing decision-making power and aligning business outcomes with community aspiration are key concepts which need acceptance in organisational structures in order to drive the business and reduce the risk of failure. Semiotics has contributed to the methodological framework in which to consider the relationship between agencies of government and communities, as it offers a way to understand social construction which holds negotiated meaning in communities. Semiotics also plays a significant role in the theoretical framework, as it sheds light on the nature of communication through symbols and codes, and therefore meaning.

The underpinning policy logic around community strengthening assumed both place – and people-based responses by government as a new way of delivering outcomes for the community. Traditional government social deliverables have focussed on communities of interest through the Office of Women’s Policy, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, the Victorian Multicultural Commission and Sport and Recreation etc. The place-based response is a more recent attempt to bring together whole-of-government responses to addressing and/or preventing disadvantage as well as investing to achieve broader community strengthening outcomes.

The addition of the planning portfolio to the community agenda has provided a strengthened relationship between the social and spatial planning agendas. The combination of land use and community planning as areas of professional expertise provides the opportunity to create better communities through using
spatial planning as a lever to enable change for communities and through improving the planning process by applying community development principles to the planning process.

Most Victorian government departments have tightly defined portfolio objectives which continue to deliver responses that are contextualised through communities of interest.

For example, the Planning portfolio has the development industry, local councils, planners and lobby groups as stakeholders and clients. The Education Department mostly works with other education providers and committee structures within schools, and more recently has taken up the mantle of schools as community hubs – an attempt at a place-based response by government.

The portfolio objectives, and therefore reporting of outputs, are the focus for senior representatives within organisations, as the sign of success is achievement against key indicators. Building social capital has a long-term focus and achievements that do not directly correlate with budget cycles.

Building social capital is not considered core business for individual agencies, although it is often an output of a particular program or, more broadly, the public sector. From a public perspective, the audience or recipients of departmental intervention or activity are often the same people or organisations. Councils and community organisations continually express the frustration that they have to work across numerous government departments to achieve integrated outcomes for their local communities.
Across government departments, there have been efforts to implement community engagement or strengthening activities within portfolio activity. The capacity and capability across government to build social capital through engagement activity is diverse in response and varies widely in regard to quality, benefits and achieved outcomes. The outcome of strengthened communities is viewed as the domain of DPCD and DHS rather than a contribution made by all parts of government.

The existing formal process of government activity provides the opportunity to demonstrate that community connectedness has been achieved. Most obvious examples include inclusive public forums such as community cabinet, participatory planning processes, independent safeguards like the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (vic.gov.au), Environmental Effects Statements (dpcd.vic.gov.au) and numerous ministerial advisory bodies. These more formal processes working alongside a community engagement logic could provide the cornerstone of the state government’s relationship with communities.

1.3.1 Response by government agencies
Jim Cavaye (2000) noted the level of attention being paid to the development of capacity building by various state jurisdictions across Australia and tests the strength of the idea that government has a role to play in creating social capital. He concluded that the main role of government is to lead the way, facilitate the process and provide access to supportive funding arrangements. This commitment to process and providing the context for community building to occur does not consolidate a sustainable and economically driven logic for
ongoing investment by government. Faced with funding schools, hospitals, roads or community building, the intangible investment in community is a difficult argument to sustain.

The level of interest in social connection by politicians in Victoria, and therefore public servants, is a clue to the level of attention we should be paying to developing a strengthened community agenda and building a body of practice. In their role of representing their local community, individual politicians keenly understand community connectedness and are acutely aware when it is not working. The community building agenda has emerged from the social paradigm into the broader language of government, of service delivery and into the thinking within portfolios, both at ministerial and bureaucratic levels. Over past years, the social policy agenda in Victoria has shifted from addressing disadvantage to a broader community paradigm which includes a focus on growth areas and investing in building social capital, as well as addressing and preventing disadvantage.

The Victorian public sector is made up of many parts. There are large and small departments, agencies and statutory authorities, committees of management, boards, local councils, not-for-profit groups and the Commonwealth also has numerous points of intervention. The scope of this study includes the work of two inner budget departments and two statutory authorities covering the transport and environment portfolios in the Victorian Public Service. The rest of the public sector comprises many entities with a role to play in building social capital across the state and this work could equally apply more broadly.
In Victoria, there has been considerable work to shift organisational focus from internal to external, to ensure response to the broad and varied needs of the community. A number of departments have attempted to focus their attention on the external world – DPCD runs In the Community events, DSE oversees Catchment Management Authorities, VicRoads has a strong regional interface and meets regularly with each municipality and DOI ran regular community consultation processes and an extensive market research program. These activities are not specifically designed to build social capital but to gather and collect information, to share ideas and to identify local issues. From the perspective of the organisation, they are designed to focus externally and respond to external stimuli, indicating a changing emphasis on the way in which government organisations are structured and managed.

A focus on the external world has been included in the lexicon of the transport portfolio:

*We need to think about the transport system not as something which is isolated from the wider urban form but which is closely integrated with it. So when we build stations we should build them on the basis not of architectural flights of fancy but in terms of practically what works for the people who are going to be using it.* (Betts, 2011).

These sentiments seem to indicate an openness to shifting from a universal systems logic to a more community driven approach in the conceptual and physical design of the transport network.

The benefits of the community strengthening agenda and investment by government are difficult to quantify, partly because the programs are relatively new and do not have an extensive evidence base, and because there is a limited relationship between investment by government and demonstrable outcomes.
(dpcd.vic.gov.au). The benefit description for community strengthening focuses on the process steps required to build relationships, achieve an agreed plan and begin implementation through community connections, as well as maintaining an ideological position which assumes that local decision making improves the well being of recipients because they have a connection with the outcome. The obvious benefits for government are tangible outcomes in the realm of ownership for local communities, the demonstration of public participation and improved outputs as a result of localised input.

The portfolio structure of government provides Ministers with a strong accountability framework, yet does not encourage holistic community approaches to problem solving (vic.gov.au). The arrangement of government departments can impede a strategic approach to working in partnership with communities, councils and the private sector if the desire for integration is not driving the effort of business. A community driven approach to delivery can be problematic when there are tight timeframes, urgent needs or complex and multi-faceted issues to address.

1.3.2 Generating social capital through community building
The concept of relationships between government departments and the community in an effort to build social capital is at the heart of this research project. Relationships initiated by government agencies with the community are built to achieve a number of objectives, most commonly to fulfil a belief that improved outcomes are achieved through diverse participation or to mitigate unwelcome obstacles placed in the path of delivery. The community strengthening agenda is based on a logic which assumes that participation in itself
is an outcome and key to healthy communities. Participation in social and
economic life builds strong relationships and therefore robust and resilient
communities is the fundamental assumption on which the community
strengthening agenda in Victoria is based (Adams & Hess, 2010).

Inherent to building social capital through engagement and participation is the
belief that government must have a relationship with communities. The principle
underpinning the relationship model is a belief that greater benefits are achieved
if the sum of the whole works to solve issues and pose innovative community
strategies. Joining up the components of the public sector with an interest in
finding a solution to a major social issue can find answers to difficult questions,
with all the information on the table and a well developed relationship with the
community.

A significant component of the Government’s commitment to the relationship
with communities is delivered through a number of departments and agencies.
Portfolio responsibilities are divided among departments and Ministers to cover
policy development, service delivery and issues management. The reconstruction
of the departmental structure in Victoria has seen an increase in cross-
departmental collaboration and the notion of joined up government for the
purpose of policy development and service delivery. The relationship landscape is
notable for the range of complex and competing, internal and external drivers.
Departments are driven by government priorities, organisational (internal) needs
and the public requiring services to be delivered.
1.3.3 Evidence of social capital

Through DPCD, the government has invested in building social capital (see further discussion in Chapter 2) through programs such as Community Renewal, Community Building Initiatives and the establishment of a strong regional presence to build local governance arrangements. Also through DPCD, the government is using traditional grant-making activities to build social capital by demanding broad engagement at the local level and ensuring that fund leveraging occurs within government and the community sector. The overall outcomes to date are unclear. There is some evidence (social indicators) that, where government undertakes place-based investment in order to address disadvantage, improvements to school retention, literacy levels, workforce participation and increased income levels can be achieved. There is limited data around the benefits of increased community connectedness at the local level.

Even when it can be demonstrated that community connectedness has increased (eg Caroline Springs) (Adams & Hess, 2010) in a local context, it is unclear whether improvements are related to government intervention or whether they would have occurred through the traditional processes utilised for works programs. The evidence base for this logic requires refinement and the collection of data, which is currently occurring but will take some time to be robust enough for further policy development.

In response to the policy objective of increasing social capital, Victoria has a strong framework to support continuation of the community strengthening activity through ongoing program planning and building an evidence base. There is an indication that other jurisdictions are attempting the same objectives via
different structural arrangements – located in Premier or Prime Ministerial offices, traditional community service – based departments that have a stronger emphasis on disadvantage through place based responses.

Even though Victoria has led Australia regarding policy development and program implementation directly targeted to achieving community strengthening outcomes, the articulated outcomes are still restricted to a number of specific examples. DPCD has promoted Caroline Springs (dpcd.vic.gov.au) as a positive example of brokerage investment realising efficiency outcomes. Much of the description regarding benefits from government investment is process based – building relationships, participating in activities, facilitating social connection. Tangible benefits tied to government priorities – literacy, school retention, personal wealth, health – are negligible although difficult to argue against.

Community capacity building is the activity in which government invests to achieve stronger communities. The link with academic endeavour has traditionally been through sociologists exploring the structure of society. Today sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists are interested in the elements that make up community and culture. The wider interest by linguists, cultural theorists and state employees reflects the broader social agenda at play. Social connectedness is more than a welfare-based response to disadvantage; the issues resonate with the broader community.

The continuum of understanding of community strengthening by academia ranges from exploration around market-driven responsiveness (Considine & Painter, 1997) to government accountability for building social capital (OECD,
The body of literature exploring community strengthening agendas is vast and varied, covering the process of community building, the tools to undertake community building, the results of community building activities, and models and methods for creating social capital.

As work on social connectedness by academics has become more closely aligned with positioning by representatives in government agencies including elected officials, there is an increased emphasis on the role of government agencies to facilitate social connection, provide the context for social cohesion, drive policy development around a collaborative model of government, and deliver services in a multi-agency environment. The messages on social connectivity made by academics working with and within government have resonated with politicians at the local level and have informed policy construction throughout government.

1.3.4 Community sector commitment
The recognition by government that service and program delivery is highly dependent on the community sector should go a considerable way towards reinvesting in the community sector as a whole. Underpinning ongoing government reliance and support for the sector is acknowledgement that volunteering and philanthropy are key areas of activity which need ongoing support. It seems that all community building activities, whether run by state or local government, depend on the free time of many individuals through involvement and participation in civic business. Programs such as Community Renewal and Community Building Initiatives, even though run by paid professionals, can only achieve local outcomes through voluntary local contribution.
The community sector, although fragmented and not tightly organised as a sector, is a professional service-delivery mechanism in Victoria. In other Western nations, the concept of the not-for-profit sector as the third sector (Strengthening Community Organisations Project report, DPCD, 2007) is a strong force behind government deliberation and service delivery arrangements. Within the professional community sector lies the recipients and participants of their ministrations – the community.

The Victorian Government recently established the Office of the Community Sector (OCS) in recognition that the fragmented sector provides a range of services across the community and needs one point at which it can talk to government. Through the OCS, the government is building a sustainable relationship across the not-for-profit space and investing in building the sector leadership capacity.

1.4 **The need for research**

The community strengthening agenda is a loose collection of activity which delivers social capital legacies or residue in local communities. Communities invest time and energy in analysing data, developing information, sharing ideas and considering the future and its implications on their collective and individual lives. The system in which this activity occurs is a heavily coded space – it requires understanding and interpretation, and in order to be effective it requires reassembly and construction. Both the process of doing and the sharing of knowledge are fundamental cornerstones for community engagement in order to successfully commence building the outcome of change.
Community relationships are supported by a number of social structures whether they exist due to locality or commonality or are issue-based. Social structures provide coherence, normality and consistency to the relationship base as well as negotiating an agreed language and meaning platform. Coherent structures are evident in location-based communities which generally have a base which includes infrastructure, children and their needs, social interaction and the provision of goods (Onyx, 1996). The tangible factors relate to common need, agreed usage and public/private ownership. Agreements around social assets are often embedded in cultural understanding; participants do not have to negotiate their place or space, and most coded discourse is understood by the participants in a defined community.

Community relationships that are established due to common interest (ongoing or short-term) require ongoing negotiation as the context changes and the relationship moves forward. The process of establishing common-interest community relationships often requires tangible support (physical support) to enable dialogue. Much of the energy of participants must be invested in understanding existing agendas, clarifying language and finding common ground.

Relationships with the community that are initiated by government sit on a continuum ranging from semi-legalistic processes to an ideological desire to build and empower citizens (Cavaye, 2000). In Victoria, formal processes included in the community framework range from the Victorian Civil Administrative Tribunal and ministerial appointments to boards and planning procedures. Processes established by government which sit within a new labor ideology of
empowerment, self-determination and community building include structures such as Catchment Management Authorities, Victorian Coastal Boards and the eleven projects included in the Victorian Community Capacity Building Program (di Francesco in Glover, 2000).

Community-driven relationships with government arise from the need to take action, to change/stop government decisions or to build something for the future. These relationships are less formal and often appear as community consultative forums (eg Geelong Ring Road Community Consultative Group), community advisory boards (Otway Forest Reference Group) and ongoing management groups. Many of these community structures are formed due to community pressure to have a public voice on an issue or to solve a local problem. Participation in these structures involves negotiated meaning throughout the process of inception, consolidation, action and resolution. Much of the dialogue is public, participatory and assumes an ongoing learning environment as community capacity is built and constructed.

A key yet invisible component of community relationship structures is the language of signs and symbols (Hodge & Kress, 1988). The coded semiotic system is the glue which holds the social and physical together in order to make meaning. Social discourse, and its context, only have meaning through dialogue. The process of understanding, finding agreement and common ground, and subsequently resolution is fundamentally dependent on the invisible social communication system at play. Discourse is more than words; it comprises the language of understanding, the symbolism and meaning of words, of the physical
environment, of action. Developing commonality is only achieved through deconstruction and reconstruction of language, meaning, context and action.

The community strengthening agenda in Victoria continues to balance prosperity and disadvantage, and to provide opportunity for civic participation, as long as the community communication systems are enabled, engaged and robust. It is imperative that community communication is viewed as a major component in the community building or social capital agenda. Participation, civic engagement and robust communities can only move forward if all the players have capability and knowledge. Sustainability of the community building agenda is dependent on agreed understanding, common beliefs and knowledge of tactical engagement activity. Most importantly, those engaged in the process of providing opportunity for engagement need to be experts in community communication.

The social construct of community is a public activity. Creating communities holds at its very core the notion that people connect with each other. Connection with others shifts the relationship capacity from the family unit (private space) into a visible public space through the process of engagement. The public process of building communities, and therefore communities influencing a sphere wider that their own backyard, is a dynamic social activity undertaken in a public place. Clearly the notion of capacity building or community connectedness is a public activity governed by the intangible rules of public meaning making.

1.4.1 Finally

The importance of community conversation aims to better understand the role of community communication structures in the quest to build stronger, more
resilient communities. The project makes reference to the community strengthening agenda in Victoria and builds knowledge among a select group of senior bureaucrats in order to better understand the community building objectives of the Victorian government. The project queries the level of understanding of community communication as a key component of community engagement activity and, finally, proposes a model on which to build greater understanding of the way in which communication activities may operate.

The data generation method utilises conversations within the bureaucracy to ascertain understanding of community relationships from the perspective of a government agency. The conversation is between bureaucrats about communities and does not include discussion with community leaders about their experience of government relationships. Perhaps that is a task for the future, to explore community communication in greater detail.
Chapter 2
Literature review

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The literature reviewed in conducting *The importance of community conversation* project has been selectively considered in order to explore a number of the key concepts leading towards the development of a model for community communication. The theoretical starting point for the review of literature emerged from a business and management framework that was underpinned by a social science discipline. Significant bodies of work are mentioned yet not explored in detail in order that a broad based review of the literature could be undertaken.

This chapter brings together and explores the concepts of community building/strengthening, community engagement, social capital and social communication as key to developing an understanding of a community communication system. This review acknowledges but does not specifically focus on international research, as Victorian academics and bureaucrats offer significant interpretation and adaptation of much of the work undertaken outside Australia.

The structure of the review of the literature attempts to follow a linear logic which reconstructs the process as it actually occurs in the world – engagement, building, output and sustainability. Of course each activity occurs concurrently or in a more random manner than this project proposes but, in order to explore
each of the concepts as part of a whole, they have been investigated as separate but inter-related components.

Another limitation inherent within the review of the literature is the focus on government activity. Community building is undertaken at a local level and driven by local communities, but this review of literature focuses heavily on the role which government has been appropriating community building as part of a larger reform agenda for the business of doing government. Much of the current community building agenda in Victoria is currently being led by government (ABS, 2002), particularly at the state level. The Commonwealth Government has an interest in the liveability of cities and local government has well established and practical relationships with communities at the local level. The Victorian State Government has invested heavily in exploring both theoretical and practical application of the community strengthening and social capital building agendas. Thus, much of the analysis and development of action-based frameworks has been undertaken through the Victorian Public Service and a number of key academic writers.

Local government in Victoria has taken on the role of building communities as part of its key business, with individual councils engaging with local communities on a regular basis. Standard methods and techniques are applied inconsistently and councils tend to rely heavily on state government financial support to respond to the requirement for a community plan (DPCD).

The review of literature explores the individual concepts which make up the community communication system. Each concept is an essential component of
the proposed system but requires understanding, deconstruction and reconstruction as the model of community communication is being articulated.

The community communication system has been constructed from empirical work explored in this thesis, which was informed by the literature explored in this review.

The building blocks underpinning the community communication system include the key concepts (as explored in this chapter), the collective understanding built through conversations (explored in the findings chapter) and the linking together of created knowledge. The model is the commencement of building greater understanding of the community communication system which underpins the community engagement and building strategies undertaken in various state government portfolios.

This thesis does not offer a specific definition of community as the author considered that an understanding of community was diverse and heavily explored in various literature.

2.2 Building social capital
Understanding social capital is key to developing community strengthening activities and is an essential piece of logic underpinning the idea of a community communication system. Social capital is the output achieved through community strengthening activities which are delivered using community engagement tools.
The concept of social capital can be viewed as an asset base from which community members can borrow in order to conduct the local or civic business of the community. Investment in social capital is achieved through networks, community groups, civic action and local governance arrangements. The concept of social capital is viewed as having broad community benefits that can be traded via transaction. It exists only as a concept alongside natural, economic and human capital (ABS, 2002; Black & Hughes, 2001) but has been notoriously difficult to quantify.

2.2.1 Social capital as logic
There are numerous definitions of social capital which include descriptors of how social capital is created, but there is ongoing debate on measurement techniques to explore the value and depth of social capital. The notion of social capital is embedded in the concept of place and is fairly fragile, as the ‘capital’ can be quickly eroded if individuals leave or disengage from a community.

Collectively, the definitions articulated provide a solid sense of the concept of social capital and the ways in which researchers and public servants might interpret and understand the data.

The following definition describes the architecture of social capital rather than the tangible product:

*Social capital is associated with concepts such as ‘community’, ‘trust’ and ‘networks’. It refers to the institutions and relationships that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions. Social capital is not just the sum of institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together. (World Bank definition in Woolock, Renton & Cavaye, 2004, p.3)*
Through the Commonwealth Department of Family Services the structural analysis continues:

'It is largely a rebadging of what sociologists previously called social networks. Measures of social capital are quite largely measures of linkage, of networks.' (Johnson, Heady & Jensen, 2005, p.25)

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2002) provides a variation on the description of social capital as the working definition:

In Measuring social capital: discussion summary and next steps, the ABS adopted as a working definition proposed by Winter (2000), ‘social relations of mutual benefit characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity’. (ABS, 2002, p.4)

The ABS (2002) then summarises a number of usable definitions from various writers in the field:

- norms, networks and trust to facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit
- the degree of social cohesion – processes between people to facilitate mutual benefit
- building of healthy communities through collective, mutually beneficial interactions and accomplishments, particularly those demonstrated through social and civic participation
- social structure, obligations and expectations (ABS, 2002)

The majority of authors in this field agree on the broad interpretation of social capital as being concerned with the quality of relationships which exist at a community level and provide opportunities for collective decision making or action. Many describe the structure of these relationships as an important characteristic with the important, and measurable, component contained within the nature and fluidity of the interaction between people.

2.2.2 Understanding social capital

The Victorian DPCD (2009) has developed a set of indicators to establish community strength which can be utilised over time to establish the impact of intervention at the local government level. The indicators examine the
opportunity to participate in community activities and to access assistance when required and overlay data on community attitudes to safety and racial tolerance. When utilised alongside other data – education attainment levels, domestic violence complaints – the indicators provide greater depth to an understanding of the level of social capital which may exist within a community.

Using the indicators of community strength will provide social analysts with a more robust way of understanding the value of the ‘capital’ held within a social structure. This step forward moves the discussion on social capital from structural and descriptive to a value-based and data-rich environment. At some point in the future, the level of intervention will be correlated with the indicators of strength and used to prioritise and target investment by the public and private sectors.

Throughout the literature, there is limited acknowledgement that the quality of collective relationship is utterly dependent on well developed and sustainable communication activity. The fact that, in order to collectively understand issues and make decisions, humans use communication is assumed and invisible within discussions regarding social capital and methods for building it.

While there is considerable literature supporting social capital, there are some critical observations which question the premise on which the concept is based.

Ben Fine (2001) points out that the concept of social capital is an oxymoron, a term dreamed up by economists trying to redefine their narrow world of economic theory. He says:
Having deconstructed the notion of social capital, Fine ultimately agrees with it as a concept on which to base an understanding of the components which make up sustainable communities. Concluding with a triple bottom line – type analysis, Fine places himself in the world of social theorists through his acknowledgement that social and economic activities are the dominant platforms on which communities must base their futures.

Putnam (2000) explores the implications of different understandings of social capital – primarily ‘bonding social capital’ faces into the community and reinforces exclusivity and homogeneity while ‘bridging social capital’ is a more open construct which encourages diversity and fluidity. Putnam’s framework provides useful insight into the quality of the social capital owned by a community.

While the social indicators (DPCD, 2009) provide tools to understand community cohesion, the bridging/bonding concept offers the opportunity to place a positive/negative value on the orientation of the community.

The final piece of the jigsaw in understanding measurement of social capital focuses on the strength of bonding within a community. Patulny and Svendsen (2007) bring together bridging/bonding with a qualitative and quantitative grid in an attempt to provide more sophisticated analysis of the strength and worth of social capital built by a community. Their measurement tool attempts to
incorporate ‘trust’ as a measurable indicator that has bearing on the worth of the social capital.

The binary juxtaposition of key concepts produces a rather fragmented understanding of social capital – which at its very base concept is holistic in nature. While accepting that measurement is important, it seems difficult to wrap a process around all the elements that indicate a strong, open and forward-thinking community.

For the purposes of this project, a broad understanding of social capital has been utilised to provide the conceptual framework for developing and building an approach to community communication. The social capital concept provides the intellectual motivator for community building activities. Social capital as a concept provides a logical investment framework to which government can contribute and easily litigate a case for a good return on public dollars.

2.3 Community building/strengthening
In Victoria, the social policy agenda has a number of key themes that are being implemented across various jurisdictions to address disadvantage and achieve socially inclusive outcomes. Creating a level playing field in which an increased number of communities can share in the state’s social and economic wellbeing is a major objective of *A Fairer Victoria* (DPCD, 2009).

In addressing disadvantage using cross-departmental program levers, the Victorian Government has been keen to address broader social issues around inclusion, participation, local governance and democratic engagement. These
objectives have been included in the scope of social policy as evidence regarding social wellbeing and cohesion which contribute to understanding the social and economic equilibrium of a community. Active participation at the level of community is seen to be contributing opportunity creation at both the community and individual levels. The DPCD community indicators (DPCD, 2009) will provide evidence into the future to demonstrate that increased participation raises the opportunity for social and economic wellbeing.

Put bluntly, an engaged community is more likely to make use of existing assets and actively consider community driven wellbeing for the future. Engaged citizens (Putnam, 2000) are more likely to demonstrate higher standards of living, economic prosperity and wellbeing. Communities with a higher percentage of disengagement evidence higher levels of domestic violence reports, lower educational attainment levels and increased health issues.

2.3.1 Government leading community building
A Fairer Victoria (DPCD, 2009) was being implemented across government, primarily through the portfolios responsible for education and skills, early-childhood services and human-services delivery. The broader notion of community building is being delivered throughout government by agencies delivering their day-to-day business using more sophisticated community engagement methods.

The previous Labor Government in Victoria was voted into power in 1999 with a clear agenda to improve relationships with the community. Using the Kennett Government’s failure to establish lasting connections with large components of
the community (women, rural) as the springboard, the incoming Bracks (then Brumby) government:


Notwithstanding that the commitment to govern for all people was an election promise, the strategy of community building and strengthening is supported by a solid theoretical and empirical research base (Adams & Hess, 2001; Cavaye, 2000; Onyx, 1996; Reddel & Woolcock, 2004). *A Fairer Victoria* (DPCD, 2009) attempts to position a whole-of-government approach to bridging the gap between communities of highest disadvantage and the state norm against criteria such as literacy, health, employment, school retention and mobility. Cross-government attempts to move beyond the logic of disadvantage to a more universal community building methodology include government-funded programs such as Neighbourhood Renewal, Community Renewal and the Community Building Initiative.

The Victorian Government has attempted to support the theory of community strengthening through the creation of the Department for Victorian Communities (now Department of Planning and Community Development). DVC brought together a range of portfolio-based responses to people and a new emphasis on community strengthening based on the logic of place. Using a framework which includes recognition of four societal capacities – human, economic, environmental, social – DVC attempted to consolidated people and place through a community strengthening lens. DVC had a number of key agendas, namely, to demonstrate place based approaches and change the way in
which government works. DVC has provided a sound theoretical base on which other departments and agencies can base their community engagement activities.

This review includes an attempt to understand and define community strengthening, which has been constantly refined as the author has explored the topic through various community development, community consultation, capacity building and community participation trajectories. The field is awash with studies and theories (Adams & Hess, 2001), particularly with a resurgence in exploring social capital and community capacity building (Evans, 1997; Fine, 2001; Healy & Hampshire, 2004; Portes, 1998). The notion of community engagement is complex, as it relies heavily on an agreed concept of community as a starting point. McCabe et al. (2006, p.3) offer a definition:

community engagement is currently understood as operating within OECD countries as a government to community flow process aimed at the individual within the community rather than towards the community as a whole.

The model proposed through the Victorian DPCD (2009), (previously Department for Victorian Communities) views community engagement as a tool for achieving community building activities (as the process) and as a stand-alone outcome, as engagement is a key component of participation. Participation (as explored above) is fundamental to achieving improved social outcomes within communities experiencing disadvantage.

McCabe’s understanding of community engagement does not correspond completely with definitions provided by authors such as Cavaye, 2000; Edwards, 2002; Onyx, 1996 and Reddel & Woolcock, 2004. In fact, the OECD policy brief (2001, p.2) describes separate components of the engagement process, which
includes information as a one-way relationship, consultation as two-way and active participation as a relationship based on partnership. McCabe’s definition is clearly an insufficient interpretation of the OECD representation of community engagement, and does not resonate with other academics or professionals in the field.

McCabe et al. does, though, provide an understanding of the historical context for the development of community engagement, and concludes that community engagement is a concept which ties together community development, consultation, capacity building etc. Each concept works separately at an operational level but, at the level of a constructed reality, community engagement is a tool underpinned by an outcome-driven agenda.

2.3.2 Community engagement versus community building

Much of the activity in Victoria around strengthened communities has assumed an agenda of participation as a fundamental concept in building improved social structures. The community as governance notion is limited to a construction of participation as civic. Through various community building programs (the aforementioned Community Renewal and Community Building Initiative) local governance structures are established to lead planning and to coordinate emergent activity. The program logic assumes intrinsic value in the act of civic participation.

Community building programs designed on a population basis (rather than place) also put emphasis on governance arrangements as the key to longevity. By their very nature, population-specific programs are less likely to have locally focussed
governance models. This model of civic participation is more individually focussed, as participants are embedded in problem solving for their community, and resonates more closely with McCabe et al.’s (2006) view of community engagement within the community building agenda.

Both these models are limited to a formalised civic participation agenda and place little emphasis on the myriad ways in which everyday people engage with their local community. Most evident in rural or regional areas of Victoria, participation is experienced through sporting activities, communal events and the delivery of services.

Cavaye (2000) describes a needed paradigm shift from “vicious cycle” to “virtuous cycle” of relationship between government departments/agencies and the general community, which embodies principles of the dual role for government as service deliverer and facilitator of community capacity building. Cavaye (2000, p.iii) also notes the need for public servants to adopt new roles which blend formal consultative structures with grassroots participation and provide technical and facilitative tasks together, to operate as both deliverer and the catalyst for change.

Reddel (2002, p.50) makes comment on the old methodology for community participation:

has been the reductionist approach to citizen participation using the limited methodologies of community or stakeholder consultation.

and poses a new logic for practice. He suggests a binary position where the retreat from the state and the rediscovery of community together provide a
“dominant discourse centred more around the idea of the community as a new territory for the administration of individual and collective existence” (2002, p.56). Reddel articulates the position that the current chasm between the state “as a useless abstraction” and the “empowered consumer” is the space in which discourse centred around the “relationship of citizen to society” can be undertaken.

The concept of community building addresses the participation of citizens in public life, in improved decision making and in networked governance issues (Adams & Hess, 2001; Considine, 2001) but it does not directly relate to the notion of strengthening communities. The concept of community strengthening from a government perspective currently focuses heavily on disadvantage and the need for government to undertake preventative intervention activity. The investment by government into community strengthening assumes that social connectedness will increase the health and wellbeing of a community. The logic for investment assumes that preventative action will ameliorate the need for extensive and dramatic intervention in the lives of individuals. The overriding assumption is that communities that are healthy and prosperous experience less disadvantage and are resilient in the face of change.

More recently, the disadvantage perspective is not the only way in which government in Victoria has applied community strengthening activity. There are numerous examples in the practice of community strengthening where agencies are not working with disadvantage but are heavily involved in facilitating community strengthening. The Department of Sustainability and Environment has achieved community strengthening outcomes through the new managing fire
planning activity and the Department of Education will achieve community outcomes through implementation of their Schools as Communities program (Commonwealth Government, 2009). The shift of community strengthening from a response to disadvantage to a broader concept of economic and social engagement has enabled whole-of-government approaches to building communities.

The shift in concept has achieved broader understanding and engagement across the Victorian Government, but has less clarity around objectives and measurement of outcomes.

2.4 Community as dialogue

Adams and Hess suggest that the new emergence of an old discourse “represents a shift in relations between the state, the market, and community, as the key systems underpinning liberal democracies” (2001, p.13). They claim that the emergence of community as discourse has arisen as the result of a failure in policy, that market-driven responses have stifled political and qualitative judgements and that community currency is a direct result of that failure.

As the market-driven approach becomes a less than viable or sustainable option as the sole operating principle for social relationships, the nature of communities has become embedded as the new narrative. Within the Victorian State Government, a stronger emphasis on triple-bottom-line program design has given visibility to the concept of community as an output or, at the very least, considered equal to environmental or economic concerns. The dialogue around community continues to be an exploration of the nature of the activities
undertaken at the community level, the relationship-based approach to problem solving and the mechanisms through which communities build resilience.

The bureaucratic narrative has moved beyond an approach to communities as disadvantaged to a broader community investment logic as a response to Adams and Hess (2001). The internal government narrative emerges as a consequence of the market failure concept or that community wellbeing is seen as a contributor to economic prosperity and overall social strength.

Community as governance is an emergent concept in response to difficult, market-driven policies and economic rationalism, and it is the conclusion of the community dialogue. Community as governance can only exist while market forces do not fully represent the needs of communities of interest. Community as governance can only exist while government embraces “community as a foundation for policy making and implementation” (Adams & Hess, 2001, p.14). Community as governance is not a stand-alone concept; it is dependent on both government and the market for legitimacy.

Within the state government context, community as governance has been embedded as a key factor in responses to social disadvantage, disaster response and community building (DVC, 2009). Numerous programs are delivered using a community development approach and with governance arrangements which facilitate local decision making.
2.4.1 Building the community logic
The logic behind community capacity building can be understood in the context of social capital. If social capital (Fine, 2001; Putnam, 2000) is the measurable quality of relationships at a community level and the ability for collective decision making or action as previously discussed, community capacity building is getting ready to invest in building social capital.

Cavaye (2000) defines capacity building as creating mechanisms for local people to articulate and act on concerns, building personal relationships between public servants and community members, and creating formal structures which acknowledge local participation. Community capacity building assumes that government has a role in creating opportunity for communities to build skills, create opportunities for their future and increase economic wealth. The capacity concept assumes that community members can join together to improve their collective social and economic health and wellbeing.

2.5 Bringing social capital and community capacity building together
Community capacity building can be seen as a tool that will enable improved decision making in society as well as building local capacity to govern, plan for the future and execute local activity (Ife, 2002). Community capacity building can be viewed as a stopgap measure to plug a failure to build sustainable social structures, and to balance market response, community needs and the role of government. Community capacity building is a direct input into the creation of social capital and slightly different to the general understanding of community strengthening.
Community capacity building assumes that communities are limited in their ability to organise, to strategise and to activate, and that intervention is required in order that participants are well versed in the rules of engagement. Capacity building is seen as an important element in galvanising disengaged communities in order that they may contribute to their own strengthening agenda.

Community capacity building, similar to community engagement, is a tool to achieve an outcome around improved economic and social wealth for a community. It is also an ideological approach adopted to stimulate local action, local reform and local empowerment (Putnam, 2000).

Within state government, community capacity building is appropriated as both an operational activity and an instrument of reform, as bureaucrats seek to increase local decision making. Utilising the notion that understanding is derived from activity (Ife, 2002) community development provides governments with new knowledge at the local and community level, while investing in the development of communities as social structure.

Increasing community-based decision making is shifting the balance of power from traditional city-based structures to a more widely distributed model that embraces diversity including location and gender as key components (Edwards, 2008). Increasing local decision making is increasing the social capital of many communities in Victoria while at the same time providing government structures with important, localised information to invest in health and wellbeing creation at a micro level.
Community strengthening is about creating sustainable networks through local level partnerships involving key stakeholders and community representatives to achieve agreed policy and service delivery outcomes for their communities (DPCD, 2009; Hughes et al.; 2007; Ife, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Community strengthening strategies aim to build collaborative relationships between individuals and groups to achieve common objectives. Many see community strengthening as the foundation of a new approach to the development of social policy (DVC, 2004) evidenced through the methods espoused through numerous iterations of *A Fairer Victoria* (DPCD, 2009).

The policy agenda clearly has a solid theoretical base and some concepts have been widely practised at both the government and community levels. A major issue highlighted by a review of the literature in this area is the limited data around measurement and the description of outcomes. Much of the material produced by government and academics is theoretical and descriptive in nature. Some authors continue to define outcome in terms of process or achievements at the process level (for example, counting numbers of meetings rather than the outcome or action) (Auditor-General, 2011) even though considerable anecdotal data indicates that, when working effectively, social connectedness is a powerful societal tool for groups of people to influence their future.

### 2.5.1 Community engagement

Community engagement, as explored earlier, is often described as a process to undertake community building and strengthening local activity. Community engagement practice primarily focuses on enabling a wide range of people in a
geographical or community of interest to participate in collective thinking which often stimulates local action. The underlying premise held by practitioners is that the engagement process itself brings the benefit of creating greater cohesion, as people are introduced into a wider social context (Ife, 2002; KPMG, 2008; Surowiecki, 2005).

In addition to the practice based benefits of facilitating social connections, community engagement is the tactical method to commence enhancing community strengthening which can support the increase of social capital existing within a community. Establishing sustainable governance arrangements between parties is an important component of supporting the trajectory from learning to action, as well as ensuring that appropriate transparency and accountability mechanisms are in place.

Community engagement activities in Victoria are generally well accepted as part of the concept of strengthening communities with the objective focussed on economic and social participation. The agenda of the state government to increase social and economic wellbeing (DPCD, 2009) assumes that strong engagement processes will help facilitate this outcome. The quality of the outcomes achieved through a community engagement process are dependent on having well understood and robust governance structures.

Through DPCD, the state government has been exploring non-traditional governance structures to develop and implement community-based programs (Auditor-General, 2011; DPCD, 2009). Local arrangements require careful planning and execution to ensure that activities are locally supported and needed,
that a robust assessment process ensures value for taxpayer funds and that communication systems are well understood (Auditor-General, 2010).

The notion that the arrangements and structure of engagement between government departments and local communities are the fundamental components for success in the development and delivery of community programs requires exploration. Recent examples of program mismanagement in the federal arena (for example, the house insulation program) demonstrate that, if local arrangements are adopted as a delivery mechanism, the accountability framework needs to be able to withstand public scrutiny.

McCabe et al. (2006, p.4) struggle to articulate governance arrangements which reflect a more modern, shared-management arrangement:

*Understanding the community as one of ‘community as governance’. . . is a way forward to achieving productive community engagement. Community as governance enables the positional equality of community and government, and the further strengthening of responsibility, thereby harnessing a high level of engagement.*

McCabe et al seem to be grappling with the differential power bases inherent in the relations between government departments and local communities. Their conclusion assumes the community is the governance arrangement. This seems difficult to sustain if communities are not functioning effectively or are closed to additional participants.

A new concept around community engagement is a useful one to explore in the application of the community building in the Victorian public sector. If community engagement is the tool for connecting with communities via consultation, capacity building and communication, the intention to share power
and provide for more inclusive decision-making opportunities is paramount for the development of a community communication model.

The intended outcome is a strengthened community. DPCD adopts a range of indicators to measure the robustness of a community using the experiences of individuals as well as social connectedness. Indicators of social strength are cast at neighbourhood and LGA levels (DPCD, 2009) in an attempt to link intervention with improved outcomes for communities. The link is tenuous, as the many variables affecting communities are not within the control of state or federal governments and the benefits of intervention are long-term achievements.

2.5.2 Changing the way government works
The notion of community as governance as the anticipated outcome from community engagement activities is an extension of earlier thinking around the role of citizens in policy making processes. Edwards (2002) explores public sector governance and points out that engaging citizens in ways which suit both the individual and government is a difficult task, as the state is never geared to respond at the level of the individual. The traditional role of government is to make decisions that respond to majority needs. Edwards notes that a shift to a partnership approach requires additional skills for public servants. The complexity of the policy advice to government is increased, as additional voices are added to the mix and the issues under consideration are more visible.

Moran (2004) adds to the ongoing debate around the deconstruction of the traditional public service governance and delivery models:
the expectations of individuals and communities about the quality, responsiveness and flexibility of government actions continue to rise. Understandably, these flow through into increasing expectations from Ministers. These increasing expectations directly challenge the traditional conception that the public sector delivers a standard service through rules based processes.

Clearly academics and senior public servants, at both state and federal level, are considering the future role that government will play in engaging with the community to improve policy-making processes and decisions. Comments from Edwards and Moran, when aligned with actions undertaken on the ground (Woolcock, Renton & Cavaye, 2004), provide a direction for the public sector to follow.

A single comment by Moran could form the guiding principle for community engagement methodology in Victoria:

Civic participation, together with local engagement, can produce impressive policy outcomes. (2004).

In 2004, Reddel and Woolcock explored the community engagement process as a major shift towards the bridge between citizen engagement strategies and participatory governance. Along with Considine (2001), Reddel and Woolcock consider the changing nature of societal relationships and:

academic and policy thinking of the ideas of community, social capital and localism as the foundations of political activity and policy making. (2004, p.75).

2.6 Social communication

2.6.1 Understanding social communication

The community building agenda by government in Victoria initially responded to the needs of the disadvantaged, but has developed more broadly as a way of connecting with communities and to support self-determination at the local level.
Both government and the community sector have articulated community development and social capital building through practice and theory. Dialogue regarding the social communication component of the community change agenda is limited to simple communications theory or traditional group work practice and methods.

Successful communication between people at the level of community needs to be a sophisticated, highly structured and permeable tool to explore ideas, prioritise action and collectively move forward. The concept of social communication assumes that deconstruction and understanding of the social environs must occur before meaningful interaction can be undertaken (Fischer 2003).

Using the context of semiotics to explore elements of the social communication structure enables both theorists and practitioners to embed coded dialogue as a significant component of the engagement process. The literature review of social communication attempts to explore the nature of codes and cultural meaning as an essential, but often overlooked, element of successful community building enterprise. Drawing heavily on semiotics, the literature reviewed builds a picture of deconstruction and reconstruction as a part of the process of social interaction and making meaning in public places. Semiotic theory combined with concepts of community building and the value of social capital are the key concepts on which the community communication model is based.

2.6.2 History and meaning
In order to explore the context of semiotics, and indeed to work towards a theory of practice, the concept of semiotics requires both a historical and
modern-day understanding. Understanding the world through the lens of semiotics commenced in the early 1960s with linguistics scholars attempting to articulate the coded meaning behind language systems (Bernstein, 1971; Saussure, 1974). Fifty years on, the usefulness of semiotics as a theoretical framework can only serve as the start of a journey to understand cultural linkages embedded into language and sign making and its importance in the community context.

The literature that considers semiotics as an academic method is vast and crosses many disciplines. This researcher has attempted a broad brush overview in order to highlight the vast and varied users and subjects of semiotic enquiry and attempted to link relevant work to the creation of a model of community communication through the explanation of semiotics and the practical application of it to community work.

Semiotics is a concept, a theory, a way of understanding the world. As a tool for academic enquiry, its proponents purport semiotics to be ideologically free. It is a tool for understanding how systems (language, physical, visual) are built and what they might mean by deconstructing and rebuilding cultural structures in society.

Semiotics is about people – people who create signs and symbols as the foundation of culture. Understanding the semiotic process (meaning making) in the context of community building activity provides a way forward in the development of a community engagement model which embraces planned communication as foundation activity (Forster et al., 1998; Gilligan, 1982; Quinn, 1996).
Since the mid-1970s, semiotics has been understood as:

*the science of signs in society* (Saussure, 1974 in Arnason, 2004).

The concept of the science of signs has been utilised by various academic disciplines to pull apart social constructions and tease out underlying meaning. Sociologists, art historians, psychiatrists, mathematicians, linguists and more recently cultural theorists and community workers have utilised the concept of semiotics, often expanding the theory and building new ways of interpreting time and space in culture (Grosz, 1992; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Underwood, 2003).

More recently than de Saussure, Silverman has offered a more modern definition:

*Semiotics involves the study of signification, but signification cannot be isolated from the human subject who uses it and is defined by means of it, or from the cultural system which generates it.* (Silverman, 1983, p.3)

Bopry proposes semiotics as

*the study of sign action (semiosis). As such it is a purely human endeavour. All life forms engage in semiosis, all use signs, only humans know they exist. Only humans engage in inquiry into semiosis, or sign activity.* (2002, p.1).

These two definitions, although similar, provide a clue to the two divergent streams of semiotics as academic streams that have been evident since the 1970s. Both streams of thought have as their core the concept that semiotics is about cultural structures, that humans make signs and attach representational meaning to the symbol-making system. Both streams assume that ideology and hegemony are fundamental concepts. Both streams focus on power, relationships and meaning making.
The de Saussure school of thinking viewed semiotic structures as sets of truth. Using language as the basis, de Saussure and followers considered structures and methodology described as truth, rules and explanations. Critics point out that his thinking was flawed, as he considered product but ignored process – the social process of creating and interpreting signs and symbols. Language is one subset of semiotics and cannot be divorced from the process of creation and interpretation and then action.

Continuing to work within the traditional semiotics school, the school of linguistics, Bernstein (1971) was able to work within the de Saussurian constraints and propose language as the purist sign-making system. Bernstein explores high and low language by considering syntax, form and meaning. Hodge and Kress (1988) conclude that Bernstein’s theory, although still problematic, has logical linkages with the concepts of ‘grid’ and ‘group’, which are inherent in the school concerned with the meaning making process and important in designing a model for community communication.

CS Pierce (in Hoopes 1991) saw all actions, all thinking as the process of semiosis. For Pierce, and many academics after him, semiotics was the study of the process of meaning making. The process itself holds cultural meaning and the individual person plays the competitive roles of meaning maker, meaning sender and sometimes meaning interpreter.

Hodge and Kress have a useful explanation of the differences between the linguistics based school and the culture based school of thinking (author’s terms):
the subject of a sentence in English comes first, which is a ‘motivated’ signifier of its importance. Outside verbal language, so many important classes of signs so obviously have some rationale (as Saussure himself recognised) that it becomes difficult to justify this doctrine as a universal in semiotics. Pierce had a more helpful classification of signs. (1988, p.21).

Hodge and Kress (1988) explain Pierce’s system as classification as icon, index and symbol with a modality value built into it. The categories were important only within the social construct in which they were created, interpreted and acted on. For semiotics, Pierce envisaged the concepts of interpretant and differentiated between icons (represent what they signify) and symbols (abstract meaning) as the evolutionary path to understand human meaning making.

2.6.3 Approach to semiotics
To contextualise in the current world of academia, de Saussure used a positivist paradigm (Giddens, 1974) to organise, categorise and deduce meaning. Adopting a positivist approach requires a systematic and scientifically verifiable logic applied to the subject. In this instance, language was pursued to explore the positivist concepts of prediction and explanation, verifiable testing and deductive logic, assuming a number of agreed social laws. German and Russian semioticians utilised this approach and explored mathematics and art (Parkany, 1998) to extreme conclusions.

In contrast, Piercian theory (Fitzgerald, 1966) shifted much closer towards the interpretivist paradigm, as he explored the notion that the process of semiosis can only be undertaken by humans, and therefore is subject to analysis by groups of people and individuals. In stark contrast with positivism, interpretivism relies heavily on the role of the observer and notions of social reality and is more
closely aligned to the underlying assumptions of work with communities. Historically, semiotic approaches to linguistics were the major mode of semiotic academic enquiry until attention turned to visual media and the understanding that knowledge and truth come from dialogue.

Semiotics itself has proceeded down the path of interpretation and re-interpretation. Bodies of knowledge such as structuralism, post structuralism, postmodernism and feminism have their historical roots firmly embedded in semiotics. These days it is often difficult to pull apart the different schools of thought (Lye, 1996) as the concepts have become so interdependent.

Academics such as de Saussure and Bernstein can be viewed as the fore-runners in defining and exploring terms and concepts and, importantly, the product of semiosis. Barthes and Kristeva, Eco (1976), Levi-Strauss, (Chandler, 2005) diverged to focus on the process of semiosis, not the output.

The shift of focus enabled semiotics as a process of academic enquiry to be utilised by a wide range of theorists. Removing the constraint of the linguistic, positivist approach permitted semiotics to be adopted by a range of disciplines exploring human behaviour, meaning making and the structure of culture.

Bopry proposes that semiotics provides a common language across disciplines and assumes as such that:

*semiotics represents a truly radical, nonideological paradigm shift that can provide a foundation upon which a number of methods will flourish.* (Deely, 1990 in Bopry 2002, p.1).
Application of the common language by academics and practitioners in a range of disciplines will highlight the usefulness of semiotics and lead towards a greater understanding of current usage in a broad cultural arena.

Cultural theorists concerned with communication were exploring similar themes to linguists, using structuralism to closely examine signs in society. McLuhan (1964) was using the classic language of semiotics when he attempted to explain his concept of ‘the medium is the message’.

Now a widely understood concept, the notion that there was meaning in the tools designed to carry messages was then revolutionary and hotly debated by schools of academic inquiry. McLuhan’s message was to spark the development of a number of academic disciplines that we today take for granted – media studies, communication theory, film theory etc.

McLuhan (1964) worked cross-discipline to explain himself using texts and examples from philosophy, psychology, Jungian and Freudian theory, as well as trying to tie concepts into everyday notions. He crossed over structuralism, economics and gender analysis to make points and explain key concepts. In doing so, he was clearly demonstrating the cross-discipline nature of semiotics as an analytical technique as well as a tool for understanding.

Chandler succinctly establishes the concerns of different approaches:

The structuralist semiotician is more concerned with the relation of elements to each other. A social semiotician would also emphasize the importance of the significance which readers attach to the signs within a text (Chandler, 2005).
Contradictory to Bopry’s (2002) claim that semiotics is ideologically free, McLuhan clearly articulates that leaning to the left is an inherent part of semiotics, as it can only be used to deconstruct current order. Deconstruction techniques include pulling apart and exposing assumptions, hegemonic structures and covert ideologies. This is political in its very essence.

Hodge and Kress, cultural theorists, also make assumptions regarding the ideology of semiotics, as they recognise that social formations in capitalist cultures inherently include inequality, demonstrated most clearly in the distribution of power and goods (1988).

2.6.4 The ontology of semiotics
Far from being ideologically free, semioticians assume that world order is not a given and that human based decisions are the basis on which the sign, the interpretant and the meaning are made (Chandler, 2005). Social semoticians in particular assume, more dynamically, that humans are making choices, decisions and actions based on information, interpretation, feelings and life context, and that different choices and outcomes can be achieved through alternate decision making.

The ontology of semiotics is now an assumption in academic work across numerous disciplines. The language of semiotics as a way of viewing the world has become assumed as a legitimate mode of enquiry especially as, epistemologically, the science of signs has shifted beyond only one way of knowing. Semioticians have utilised idealism and realism (Deely, 1990) as incomplete dichotomies which are superseded as the semiotic trichotomy comes
into play (Bopry, 2002). The semiotic landscape is complex, as both objective and subjective episotomologies make up the multiple realities in which ‘text’ is created, understood and developed.

Feminists have made great use of the techniques of semiotics. Clearly understanding a politicised position with various ways of being in the world, ontologically the subject (text) has no meaning without the engagement of humans applying both knowledge and creating meaning. Early feminist writing in Australia was heavily concerned with language and the cultural meanings inherent in language; later theory more closely aligns with a subjective ontology in which the inquirer is actively engaged in creating meaning.

More recently, Wolf deconstructed the notion of beauty using semiotic tools:

*Beauty is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact.* (1990, p.12).

Wolf identifies the codes, signs and symbols used to define beauty and interprets them to demonstrate the subjugation and control of women by using the concept of beauty.

Not necessarily using the language of semiotics, feminist authors and academics have pinpointed the process (semiosis) as the social construct needed to maintain power relationships intact.

As the concept of semiotics as a serious theoretical tool has become apparent, the notion of it has changed. Social semiotics has shifted the focus from a
descriptive tool to one which promotes understanding and analysis of the world context in which meaning making is taking place. Social semiotics considers social reality from a theoretical perspective without empirical evidence.

Traditional semiotics is fairly rigid and focuses on message, sender and receiver as core concepts. Modern semiotics (often called social semiotics) also considers method, interpretation and action as key ways of understanding culture making.

Cultural theorists began to use semiotic language:

*to see Australian culture not as a static collection of items but as a play of forces. We saw it as a set of ways of constructing meanings, not as specific objects or artefacts. In this view its meanings are not fixed and its values are not common. Even with such familiar cultural landmarks as the pub or the beach, the stereotype judgements ignore the creative role of the users of these cultural forms.* (Fiske, Hodge & Turner, 1987, p.4).

As can be seen from the overview explored in presenting the concepts of semiotics, the theory is not discipline bound. It has been utilised by a range of academics to explain and explore the culture of humans. Even though asserted to be ideologically free, the very process of deconstruction and analysis is political and fundamental to the process of semiosis. All theorists agree on one thing – semiotics or meaning making is in the realm of the human, not an abstracted, static or purely scientific endeavour.

2.6.5 Applying semiotics

The cross-discipline tool of semiotics has strayed beyond the boundaries of academic enquiry into everyday language. Concepts such as the medium is the message are commonly understood, and the pervasiveness of television and the construction of the news as built cultural form are readily taught in secondary

Semiotics provides a framework in which stakeholder management can be developed and implemented by the organisation. Semiotics provides the deconstruction tools to aid understanding in key concepts regarding power, social structures, symbols, signs and the importance of public discourse.

Mick identified that semiotics is useful in the realm of marketing and advertising;

*Human experience is mediated by a panorama of signs and codes both linguistic and non-linguistic and it is the meanings of these phenomena that we act upon, not the objects of quasi-existence that we assume supports them.* (1986, p.205).

In his exploration of consumer research and assumptions about sign, symbol and meaning, he concludes:

*The intense reflexivity expected from its adherents and the provisionality it layers over all explanations conjured by humanity make semiotics as insightful as it is sometimes obtuse. The formidable metalanguage and the virtuosic flair that make some semiotic writings unduly obscure have retarded the diffusion of semiotic thought into areas like consumer research.* (Mick, 1986, p.208)

Mick has clearly understood the importance of meaning attached to signs and symbols, and assessed the importance of understanding semiotics as part of the practice of marketing and advertising. Interestingly, he writes of semiotics as a doctrine but promotes its usefulness in understanding symbolic activity as consumers, researchers and makers of meaning.

Schroder (1994) has linked together the concepts of audience semiotics (agreed language) and interpretive communities to explore the validity of a research methodology. He questions the assumption in semiotic theory that individuals
live as ‘viewers’ and proposes that they operate in that mode of critical audience when requested by academics. He strays into the field of social semiotician when exploring signified consciousness:

In order to understand the complex, socially situated interpretive processes of everyday life it is necessary to adopt a semiotic and discursive view of interpretive communities. (Schroder, 1994, p.345).

Cultural theorists have seen fit to explore semiotics as a tool for understanding the making of meaning. Hodge and Kress (1988) articulate the shift of emphasis in semiotics from a traditional perspective to one they have called “social semiotics”.

Social semiotics claims to consider the whole process of sign making, sign sending, sign receivership and responsive action in the context of social, cultural and personal codes. A broad theory, it proposes that understanding the act of semiosis requires all the information to be collected from numerous coded systems operating at the same time. This view of the active participant in meaning making correlates with the notion of community development and engagement logic, where there is no subject and observer but all are present in the process.

Semiotics is a deceptively simple but complex concept. In order to read the social codes, the social participants need to know they are codes and that they must be read. Many codes are socially dependent and negotiated by the social actors and are therefore somewhat obtuse to those outside a particular social grouping.
The concept of semiotics is essentially a political deconstructionist technique utilised to explore and explain social systems that enable humans to engage with the world. Having been utilised in a wide range of academic disciplines, semiotics has shifted from being an abstract analysis of meaning making to an analytical tool able to be utilised to explore cultural construction.

Silverman articulates a strong link between Freud’s theory of the unconscious and semiotics:

*both of the ‘territories’ that comprise the geography of subjectivity are seen to derive their identity from the signifying systems which are most frequently employed.* (1983).

Hodge and Kress have taken a major step forward in advancing semiotic theory from the esoteric to the pragmatics of cultural deconstruction. They link the concepts of ideology, hegemony and class structure with signified, signifier, interpreter and meaning in order to analyse discourse (1988).

Their demonstration of deconstruction is based on an assumed knowledge, that the decoder knows and understands social meaning in order to deconstruct and interpret. The social actor must be part of the social construction in order to understand the signification, the techniques to take it apart and to understand the meaning in culture.

Lye explains:

*All meaning is textual and intertextual: there is no ‘outside of the text’ as Derrida remarked. Everything we know is constructed through signs, governed by the rules of discourse.* (1996).
Some semioticians conclude that an understanding of signified meaning will lead
to the viewer becoming an more informed decision maker. Information shifts the
perspective of the reader and semiotics assumes a changed outcome as a result of
increased information.

Social semiotics sits most comfortably within a constructionist paradigm. The
concept of social semiotics more clearly articulates the link between cultural
coding and signing systems and the people who make and use and are part of
culture.

The realism paradigm, preferred by Healy and Perry (2000) as a method for
undertaking research with humans, assumes a ‘truth’ which is contradictory to the
most basic assumptions in semiotic theory. Social semiotics builds the human
back into concepts that are disconnected from human experience:

*the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function
that the systems cannot be studied in isolation.* (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p.1).

Even though semiotics and later variations (structuralism, post-modernism, post-
structuralism) are about people and the systems they construct in order to make
meaning, the turgid language, complex concepts and imprecise application have
ensured that social scientists have not overtly utilised semiotic theory as a basis
for analysis and understanding.

Another, more pragmatic reason for semiotics sitting outside mainstream
thinking is that:

*Post-structuralism is not a school, but a group of approaches motivated by some
common understandings.* (Lye, 1996).
As a body of social thinking, deconstructionists have more in common with the newer communities of interest or practice in a more globalised environment (Snyder, Wenger & de Sousa Briggs, 2003) than traditional academic processes.

2.6.6 Unveiling the semiotic tool
An understanding of the basic concepts of semiotics, recast in a constructionist perspective, is the next task of this review, followed by an application of a model to test it in a government-external relations context. The more detailed explanation of the application of semiotics has been included in order to simplify understanding of the practical application of semiotic theory. Understanding the basic concepts behind semiotics will provide greater clarity in building the community communication model.

In order to apply semiotic theory to current management issues, the fundamental principles of semiotics must be clear to the practitioner.

To unravel the complexity inherent in most explanations, the following overview offers a package of key terms and concepts summarised from Hodge and Kress (1988) and explanatory work undertaken by Lye (1996), Silverman (1983) and Underwood (2003).

Semiotics is the process of meaning making. In order to make meaning, social actors build constructs. In order to understand meaning, social actors build guideposts and interpretation tools. Semiotics proposes that, as humans, we are continually in the process of meaning making, meaning decoding and building culture.
The semiosic plane is the space in which the process of meaning making occurs. The mimetic plane is the connection meaning has with constructed reality. A message is made up of two or more signs (units of meaning). A syntagm is a combination of signs.

Paradigmatic structures are organised choices, the selection process in which the meaning of a sign is signified by the act of choice. The realisation or existence of a sign in a message is its signifier. Codes are the system that organises signifieds and signifiers as well as indicating connectedness.

The relationship of participants is part of the context which makes understanding (reading) easier or harder. Negative relationships can create ‘noise’ between signifier and signified which will hinder the process of making meaning.

Metasigns provide clues about the signs and indicate unity and difference. In semiotics, the concept that the sign is also what it is not is fundamental for extracting meaning.

Semiotic structures have levels of cohesion which are examined in the process of deconstruction. Semioticians also examine levels of modality – the relationship between the mimetic content (connectedness to truth or the reality it represents) and referent.

Text is a string of messages that are constructed and read in the syntagmatic plane. Discourse (which creates text) occurs in the semiosic plane.
This attempt at a summary of the sign system used in semiotics will either be very obvious or sound like another language. The language is closer to an explanation of social structures than one would first expect.

Emergent thinking around semiotics came from the academic school of linguistics. It seems that much of the language of semiotics and the application of semiotics are solidly located within a linguistic metaphor:

*Thus for semioticians, a TV documentary, a radio play, a Madonna song, a poster at a bus stop are all texts. We users of these texts are referred to as readers.*

(Underwood, 2003)

### 2.7 Summary of ideas

Both community strengthening and semiotic theory are concerned with societal relationships. Both focus on structures and relationships and the connection with power and decision making. Semiotics aims to deconstruct in order to see underlying assumptions beneath decisions, structures, ideas and action. Community governance and strengthening focuses on links between the market, the community and government, and opportunities to create better outcomes.

Chapter 5 proposes a model to bring the two sets of thinking in closer alignment. The juxtaposition of two separate considerations reveals a logic with which to better understand the relationships and create transparent objectives and decision making structures. Community strengthening and semiotics together provide a direction on ways to understand and interpret, and methods to devise strategies for moving forward.
Fine has started the integrated thinking around social capital and semiotics:

> novel forms of discourse have arisen, not least in discourse theory itself, with new analytical formalisms in the study of symbolic representation, and in the critical deconstruction of meaning etc. (2001, p.12).

Chapter 5 builds on semiotics and community governance theory to suggest a practice-based implementation tool.

The landscape in which government business is delivered is evolving from a hierarchical, homogeneous, rule-based formula to a networked, responsive and individualised service. Considine claims that a new set of strategies – the corporate, market and network – have supplanted:

> the norms of the older bureaucratic code: how proceduralism, universal treatment and standardised interventions are on the wane. (Considine, 2001, p.18).

The understanding gained from the *Stakeholder engagement and consultative arrangements in government* report (Allen Consulting, 2006), in which the interdependent characteristics of participation are explored, lays the groundwork for a number of concepts to converge:

> These are ‘network governance’ where community participants work with governments collaboratively to manage them, ‘joined-up government’ where siloed bureaucratic systems give way to horizontal and vertical collaboration across agencies, and ‘community and place’ which emphasises community and place-based, or bottom up and locally tailored solutions to public issues and objectives (p.viii).

The agreed definition includes assumptions regarding place-based conversations, networked discussions and public decision-making processes as key elements within a community building framework (Boxelaar et al., 2006; Considine, 2001; Reddel & Woolcock, 2004).
More than ever, global activity is forcing organisations to rethink their future and subsequent approaches to engagement, design and delivery. Botsman and Latham (2001) propose three principles which must be in place in order that the state be engaged:

- Government remains an all-important source of social support. There can be no withdrawal of resources; the focus is on redevelopment.
- Communities, not bureaucracies, have a central role in defining, delivering and managing appropriate forms of social action.
- Government funding and bureaucracies become servants of communities, not masters (Botsman & Latham, 2001).

2.8 Conclusion
The review of the literature has revealed a body of information on community building activity, particularly the role of government regarding the approach to building social capital. The review has also demonstrated the shift in thinking from community development as a response to disadvantage, to community building as a more general set of principles that can be applied to a broader range and number of communities.

The focus on the communication systems underpinning community building has been limited to a traditional public relations type – communication response. The review has not revealed a systemic approach to communications as part of the community building agenda.
The review of material which focussed on semiotics and communications has highlighted the shift in theory from a universal systems approach to constructing communication, through to a social semiotic which recognises that meaning is made through the process of social interaction.

The researcher has concluded that data regarding the understanding of community building by government bureaucrats will be the focus of research in order to establish the knowledge base and the application of theory and to reveal the gaps in the approach by government to community building.

The research questions which have guided the generation of empirical data and the analysis of theory:

What are the understandings of senior representatives from government agencies regarding community building and its application within their organisation and more broadly across government?

Do gaps emerge from the theoretical literature and empirical body of knowledge on community building and its logic?
Chapter 3
Approaching the research

3. Approaching the research

3.1 Introduction
In this chapter, a methodology is proposed which has been developed and utilised specifically for conducting exploratory research into the social construction of the community capacity building model implemented by a number of portfolios in the Victorian State Government. The research commenced with a query regarding the extent and type of use of community engagement tools in the Victorian Public Service.

The review of theoretical literature has identified that a social capital building theory underpinned some of the work being undertaken through the Victorian Public Service. The literature review has also revealed that the gap in the design and application of the community building logic seemed to be the missing conceptual construct of social structure and communication systems as fundamental elements as a way of working with people.

The researcher attempted to understand how senior representatives from a number of government agencies viewed the community building agenda set by government and its application in their organisation. The conversations were with bureaucrats about communities.
3.2 The research question

Blaikie (2007) suggests that the question posed on the commencement of research is one of the most important elements in achieving the anticipated research outcome. In this research it was particularly important to limit and define the scope of the research through the research question. The field of community building and the business of government are vast and varied, and the interview question provided a constraint when undertaking the data generation.

Blaikie’s definition of the research question is:

*The formal expressions of intellectual puzzles….The choice of one or more research questions gives research focus and direction, delimits its boundaries, makes the research project manageable, and anticipates a successful outcome.* (2007, p.2).

The researcher posed the following two questions for examination and exploration for the project:

What are the understandings of senior representatives from government agencies regarding community building and its application within their organisation and more broadly across government?

Do gaps emerge from the theoretical literature and empirical body of knowledge on community building and its logic?

The research questions were the basis on which research commenced and led to a complex exploration utilising Interpretivism, Grounded Theory, Structuration Theory and Semiotic Theory to progress the dialogue and interpret the data.
The following discussion attempts to articulate linkages between theories and to bridge contradictions inherent in the approach and execution of the total project.

3.3 The approach to research

The research approach adopted for this project attempts to identify and resolve research-based questions throughout the data generation and analysis through an eclectic collection of aligned elements from a number of research paradigms. A significant complexity built into this approach is to mitigate the differences in approaches, follow the logic of consistency and attempt to link relevant elements into a cohesive framework.

The consequence of designing a multilayered and complex approach to data generation, articulation, analysis and the formulation of new ideas was that it required an understanding of a number of key theoretic concepts and the contribution made to the research architecture.

Blaikie (2007) identifies numerous classical and contemporary research paradigms used in social research, a number of which were considered as precursors to deciding the paradigmatic elements that were going to best address the research questions.

Selecting the most appropriate context in which to position the research involved consideration of the four classical research paradigms usually utilised for social research – positivism, interpretivism, critical rationalism or classical hermeneutics (Blaikie, 2007). The selection of interpretivism as the starting point ensured that the voice of the social actor was dominant throughout the research, which was
particularly important as the design for data generation attempted to mimic the
way in which government policy is implemented by the public service – through
creation of the narrative.

Blaikie, 2007 also offers insight into a range of contemporary research paradigms
which have also been considered in deciding the approach to the research.

The contextual framework was important, to ensure that the ontological
subtleties were aligned and consistent, particularly throughout the development
of the model, to address the identified gap in the theoretical framework of
community building.

This researcher concluded that both an interpretivist paradigm (Blaikie, 2007) and
Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984), as the context in which to combine key
conceptual elements to progress the research, would provide both
epistemological and ontological logic within the architectural structure of the
research. The addition of grounded and semiotic theory, at both the
methodological and strategy levels of the research, provided added complexity as
the work shifted from the local to more general and the researcher attempted to
resolve differences between paradigms (Diagram 1).
Interpretivism offers the perspective that the social world inhabited by social actors is constructed by social participants and is constantly being refined and re-interpreted through the actions of people (Blaikie, 2007). Ontologically, the assumption that reality is constructed by individuals aligns with the content base of the concepts on which the research is based – community and social capital building (Carey, 1989; Turner, 1990).

The nature of the research question and the need to generate data with depth throughout the project aligned with the epistemological assumptions inherent within an Interpretivist paradigm. The equal relationship between the research participants and the researcher (Blaikie, 2010) ensures that there is strong alignment between the construction of social reality within this body of work and the content under discussion. The construction of knowledge in this research was built by eight participants and the researcher, who all stem from the same...
professional context and together increased their understanding of meaning making in public places (Blaikie, 2010; Buchy & Race, 2001; Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

The choice of an Interpretivist paradigm as a component of the research ensured that the researcher could capture the responses of individuals and recognise the notion that the social reality of each participant was at the forefront in exploring issues of communities as social constructions.

Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984) provided the researcher with the opportunity to refine the paradigmatic construct to include the dualistic notion that social actors exist within established social structures and that their actions influence those structures through their actions (Blaikie, 2007, 2010; Hallebone & Priest, 2009).

Giddens offers a concise definition of his theory, which recognises that an Interpretivist paradigm is a legitimate starting point for the application of structuration-type thinking (1984, p.3):

*Structure, as recursively organised sets of rules and resources, is out of time and space, save in its instantiations and coordination as memory traces, and is marked by an ‘absence of the subject’. The social systems in which structure is recursively implicated, on the contrary, comprise the situated activities of human agents, reproduced across time and space. (Giddens, 1984, p.25).*

The chasms between researcher and participant, micro and macro, interview and interviewer, individual and collective are reduced through the acceptance of the

In particular, Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984) assumes that social constructions are constantly undergoing modification as social activity occurs and the actions of humans influence the social structures which are the context for human activity. In contrast, Interpretivism assumes that the meaning given to social activity occurs within a rational context in which individuals “make their meanings intersubjectively intelligible to others” (Hallebone & Priest, 2009). Epistemological alignment between the two theories occurs with the acceptance that, at the level of the individual humans constructing meaning, Structuration Theory goes further to purport that social action occurs as a consequence of social structures but that social structures are in themselves a product of social actors.

Structuration Theory operates, in this instance, as the bridge from the singular voice inherent to the renegotiated collective landscape of community communication. Ontologically, Structuration and Interpretivism are consistent, as both recognise the role of the social actor as subjective and open to interpretation. Structuration provides the additional clarification that the consequences of action may modify agreed social structures. In this instance, the voices of senior bureaucrats influence a broad policy objective through interpretation and its application within a government agency. In articulating a position, the bureaucrat responds from within a public service code of operating.
The data generation inherent within the research required the acceptance of concepts based on a dualistic approach to information, knowledge and understanding. There are multiple realities, stories with corollaries and the ongoing monitoring or tempering of activity as ideas are shared within the context of peer relationships.

In addition to an Interpretivist paradigm and Structuration Theory, Semiotic Theory is embedded as the third component of the methodological design. As the literature revealed, the two schools of semiotic thinking conclude with very different ontological and epistemological assumptions. Traditional semiotics has a positivist ontology, as it assumes that social structures are an objective element in which the social activity takes place. The use of Social Semiotic Theory in this research allowed the researcher to shift the dialogue from individual social constructions of reality to a broader notion of negotiated collective constructions of reality.

The researcher selected semiotic theory as a key concept within the design in order to expose the nature of meaning making as part of a collective understanding. Semiotic theory has, as a base concept, the notion that humans create signs and symbols and derive universal meaning from coding systems (Milner, 1991; Silverman, 1983). This assumption helps locate semiotics within the realm of individual constructed reality and align it with both Interpretivism and Structuration.

The awkwardness of Semiotics and Interpretivism together lies in the notion that social reality is stagnant for the moment in time when meaning, process and
outcomes are aligned within a collective understanding of the community context. Traditionally, Semiotics assumes that a number of universal truths emerge from the negotiated outcome. The notion of universal truth as a concept is not consistent with an Interpretivist view of the world nor does it resonate in the world of a senior bureaucrat.

Social Semiotics (see Chapter 2) accepts that multiple truths exist together, which implies that humans construct realities and there may be differences between and within those constructions. The ontology of Structuration Theory helps tighten the connection between Semiotics and Interpretivism, as it achieves acknowledgement of individual social reality and generalised social structures which are constantly under modification through social negotiation.

Together the three concepts provide a path from the construction of the individual to a generalised set of governing arrangements which are modified through social action. The universalism in traditional semiotics is replaced by the social semiotic, which proposes that human actions generate coding systems as part of the agreed social structure. The introduction of the social semiotic concept with an idealist ontology (Blaikie, 2007) brings the three concepts into logical alignment.

The use of Interpretivism, Structuration and Semiotics has been designed to mitigate some of the complexity introduced to the research by the combination of the key assumptions within the three paradigms. The structure attempts to provide both a path to follow in order that the logic can emerge from the process of implementation.
Other research paradigms were considered at the early stages of the research, and even though some have attractive elements for this area of study, the following conclusions were made by the researcher.

The objective nature of the positivist or neo-positivist approach made it difficult to achieve individual understandings of the way in which the public service was adopting a community approach to developing business. Due to the depth of discussion required with participants, there was not an opportunity to pose a hypothesis for testing, so this work commenced with a working hypothesis which was explored through the data generation.

Alternatively, a postmodernist approach aligns with the community development notion that human potential is curtailed by ideological assumptions built into social arrangements. The lack of shared rules and understandings in this approach rendered it difficult to achieve an understanding of collective thinking inherent to the conversation based design and the new ideas emerging from the data (Hallebone & Priest, 2009).

The design of the research attempts to articulate the ontological alignment between Interpretivism, Structuration and Semiotics through ongoing narrative of social reality and social structures as the product of human endeavour through negotiation, refinement, agreement and action. The paradigmatic architecture (Diagram 1) provides the methodological framework for approaching the research as well as generating and analysing data, and generating ideas and theory emerging from the research.
3.4 The research strategy

The paradigmatic architecture (Diagram 1) adopted for this project has significant implications for the research strategy, and therefore the construction of the relationship with participants and ways of generating the data.

The research question is broad and seeks to elicit knowledge held by participants, from both their personal and professional experience, and to create knowledge through the process of discussion.

Blaikie, drawing on Giddens, states:

*The social scientist cannot begin to describe any social activity without knowing what the social actors know, either what they can report or what they tacitly assume, while engaging in social activity.* (Blaikie, 2007, p.95).

A number of concepts from Grounded Theory (Giddens in Blaikie, 2007) were utilised to generate ideas created in the process of the eight conversations and the subsequent analysis of the data, in particular the approach to dealing with macro and micro in the same context.

Blaikie summarises Glaser and Strauss’ approach to emerging hypotheses and the generation of theories through integrated analysis throughout the evolutionary process of research:

*The process of theory generation is one of trial and error, in which tentative hypotheses are entertained and informally tested in the context of continuing data gathering. …..it’s (grounded theory) concepts are not explicitly derived from lay language; they are labels that the researcher constructs for categories that are used to organise the data.* (Blaikie, 2007, p.100).
Abductive logic (Blaikie, 2007) was applied along with grounded theory to ensure that the researcher could utilise the deep information from senior government representatives to produce typifications with common understanding, and then extrapolate to propose emerging theory.

The use of abduction in this research offered the researcher a tangible way to maintain integrity with the empirical data while a theoretical approach to understanding was applied to develop theory. Blaikie’s clarity is again utilised to explain:

> involves constructing theories that are derived from social actors’ language, meanings and accounts in the context of everyday activities. Such research begins by describing these activities and meanings, and then derives from them categories and concepts that can form the basis of an understanding or explanation of the problem at hand. (Blaikie, 2007, p.99).

Blaikie (2007) describes Grounded Theory as abduction in action. In this instance, Grounded Theory and abduction play separate but similar roles. The high level of expertise in the data generation means that the language used to explore social issues is very similar to the language used in developing themes and typification. The theoretical framework developed in response to the data resonates because the theory has emerged from the data and the theoretical overlay.

An idealist ontology is consistent throughout the approach, design and strategy for the research as Interpretivism, Structuration, Social Semiotics, Grounded Theory and abduction have aligned constructions of social reality and ways of knowing.
With emerging theories in mind, the researcher chose to utilise dialogic facilitation (Blaikie, 2010), in which the voice of the researcher is amplified to become one of the participants, in order to support the notion that policy within the public service is developed through the collective conversation of senior employees.

Conversation is understood in this context as dialogue between bureaucratic colleagues about government policies, the community strengthening agenda and their experience of community based relationships. The two-way flow of information inherent to conversation occurred between participants and the researcher.

The alignment created within the combination of three approaches, the theoretical framework and the content of the research required the research strategy to be flexible and contend with data generation and creation at both the micro and macro levels. The approach to research required the collection of high-quality information with great depth of understanding of the context in which conversations were occurring.

The research design embeds ontological and epistemological consequences for the research strategy (Jones & Noble, 2007). In particular, the concepts of multiple realities, the importance of the voice of the individual and the attempt to understand at the systems level established a complex environment in which to plan the research for this study.
The literature revealed a dilemma regarding the practice of community building and understanding of the collective coding system used in communities to communicate with each other and to an external environment. There was limited explanation and exploration of the relationship communication systems play in the creation and sustainability of community governance arrangements. This dilemma has been deliberately integrated into the research through the decision to use both grounded and semiotic theories as part of the methodology.

Grounded theory provided the ability to undertake components of the research in parallel with each other, and the emergent nature of the theory enabled the project to refine the information and continually seek clarification (Jones & Noble, 2007; Selden, 2005). Utilising grounded theory enabled the research to maintain openness so that players within the project could explore the content area as broadly and as differently as each participant was interested in components of the topic:

_In accordance with this approach the researcher enters the field with only a broad topic area of interest in mind, without specific research question, and without a detailed reading and understanding of the extant literature in the area._ (Jones & Noble, 2007, pp.84-103).

The review of literature commenced with a narrow but multi-themed focus, the research question was deliberately broad and both were continually refined throughout the period of primary data collection. As grounded theory comfortably accepts dialogue as a valid method of obtaining data, the deep conversation base provided ample ground from which theory could emerge:

_Grounded theory’s methodological emphasis is on actors’ own emergent interpretations and meanings, with minimal researcher intervention._ (Douglas, 2003, pp44-52).
The design of the research modified the assumption around minimal intervention by the researcher inherent in grounded theory, to propose the role of dialogical facilitation by the researcher (Blaikie, 2010; Jones & Noble, 2007; Swann, 2010). The role of facilitator enabled the researcher to act as a peer and contribute to the creation of knowledge and meaning throughout each of the eight conversations, which most closely reflected the reality of social engagement experienced by participants in their daily work lives.

The situational context of government departments attempting to build social capital provided adequate opportunity for an exploratory theory to be utilised as the primary research method. As the research required deep understanding in order to have meaningful discussions ranging across content as varied as social capital, operational performance, government policy and localism, data generation points were planned with senior representatives from agencies within government departments.

Alternative data generation strategies were considered, including case studies, survey and action research, but were not selected as none presented the ability to collect rich data within the limited time that such senior representatives have available. The added advantage of selecting conversation-based interviews was the opportunity to build knowledge among a group of selected people within government, as they too considered a number of the issues raised within the discussions.

Semiotic theory (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Lye, 1996; Quinn, 1996; Silverman, 1983; Somekh & Lewin, 2005) was included as part of the structure of the research
design and strategy, as it enabled the researcher to identify theory from the individual data and immediately escalate the material into a systems based response. Embedding semiotics at the design phase ensures consistency as the work moves from individual storytelling to the abstracted structure of communication systems (Mick, 1986; Watts, 2004). Semiotics assumes the creation of a social reality by humans but considers that it holds some generalised truths that are created in the process of meaning making. This is the link that moves the logic from a traditional subjective approach towards the inclusion of an abstracted construct of negotiated social reality (Blaikie, 2007) which allows the research to provide discussion regarding a system of communication.

Semiotic theory is an important component of this research, as it works alongside grounded theory to provide a dynamic, responsive and critical environment in which to develop key concepts. Semiotic ideas make up part of the analytical framework as it serves to shift the individual dialogue of the Interpretivist approach to a more systems-based framework.

3.5 Ethical considerations
Each of the eight participants were representative of their organisation as well as offering personal observations regarding the business of government throughout the conversations. The researcher discussed confidentiality with each participant prior to the conversation, and with each it was agreed that the conversation could be recorded for transcription purposes but that individual quotations were not directly attributed throughout the document. Each participant was comfortable with their name being included as a contributor and some indicated an interest in reading the thesis prior to submission.
The consequence of confidentiality agreements with each participant means that the data has been collated and reported in a generic manner with attribution against portfolio only. Appendices 3 - 7 summarise some direct quotations against the emergent themes but do not identify the names of contributors. It was deemed that these requirements did not significantly affect the epistemological or ontological assumptions in the strategy, design or execution of the research.

3.6 Data generation

The ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent to the research offer a way to generate and analyse data as part of a single process. The method for generating the data from participants is also the process of creating the data. Understanding the information and extrapolating meaning in order to progress theories emerge from the individual conversations, the whole of the conversations and the ideas discussed in the conversations. The complex interdependent linear process can only occur through the combination of Interpretivism and Structuration, as well as grounded and semiotic theories underpinning the majority of the process from which the content is required to flow.

Primary data was collected through conducting conversations between senior bureaucrats who are colleagues of the researcher (Jones & Noble, 2007), working in the Victorian Public Service in the portfolios of Transport and Environment. The conversations were designed to mimic the way in which knowledge is
created and shared within the bureaucracy, by exploring organisational responses to issues and building a body of shared knowledge within a peer group.

The government agencies from which the conversation participants came from were:

- **The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE)** which leads the Victorian Government’s efforts to sustainably manage water resources and catchments, climate change, bushfires, parks and other public land, forests, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation.

- **Parks Victoria** which is the custodian of a diverse estate of significant parks in Victoria and the recreational management of Port Phillip Bay, Western Port and the Yarra and Maribyrnong rivers.

- **The Department of Transport (DoT),** along with VicRoads and other transport agencies, is responsible for public transport, roads and ports across Victoria.

- **VicRoads’** purpose is to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits to communities throughout Victoria by managing the Victorian arterial road network and its use as an integral part of the overall transport system.

There was no attempt to select conversationalists on a representational basis. Individuals were invited to participate based on their current and previous roles as senior administrators in the Victorian Public Service (see Appendix 1). All participants are senior executive officers, with previous or existing responsibility for programmatic development and implementation in their respective agency or department.
The eight participants were invited to spend one and a half hours with the researcher discussing community-based concepts both across government and in relation to their organisation. The interviews were conducted in the office of each of the participants and were tape-recorded for transcription at a later date.

Each participant was requested to engage in a conversation-style interview in which the researcher took an active role in the discussion, (Swann, 2010). The researcher provided a context for the discussion including an explanation that the topic was about dialogue and creating meaning in public places, and that the application of community based activity in each organisation was as important as thinking about the application of community building principles into the future.

Eight conversations were undertaken in order to achieve a span of ideas from across two state portfolios. The researcher required deep data in order to postulate on the use of a number of key concepts. The researcher hypothesised that eight substantive interviews with very senior government representatives would yield adequate data to understand the approach to community activity across a number of organisations. The participants could speak authoritatively on behalf of their organisation and consider issues and ideas that might have application more broadly across state government departments.

The researcher initially made contact with the department responsible for community development policy within the state government, Department for Victorian Communities (DVC), with the intention of engaging with senior representatives. Two circumstances prevented the need for this to occur: 1) each
of the eight participants demonstrated a sound understanding of the objectives of
the DVC framework and its application: and 2) the researcher took on a senior
role in that department in 2007 and had regular access to the required
information.

The dialogic facilitation inherent in the research design ensures that the voice of
the researcher is reduced as an authority and magnified as a participant. As the
research strategy was designed to collect and interpret data in parallel throughout
the research, an abductive reasoning (Blaikie, 2007; Dew, 2007; Hallebone &
Priest, 2009, Mick, 1986) approach was adopted and applied during the collection
of data from each of the conversations (McKaughan, 2008).

The cyclical nature of research embodied in Grounded Theory – type thinking
permitted the researcher to contemplate themes as they emerged from the
conversations and begin the process of tabulation throughout the creation of the
data.

As this research commenced with an idea regarding social capital and community
building, abduction allowed the researcher to postulate throughout conversations
and begin to build theories as they emerged. As the literature review revealed a
gap around communication systems and community building, the process of
abduction was applied by the researcher as each of the conversations occurred.

Abductive reasoning is often utilised in scientific or technological research, but
the assumption is that meaning can be created by the comparison of data and
limited theoretical analysis is vital to capture emergent theory in this instance
(Dew, 2007). The creativity required to shift from individual stories and collective themes to the elements required to bridge the gap in the successful application of community building within the two portfolios included in the study was enabled by the combination of grounded theory and abductive reasoning.

Each of the conversation participants was asked a number of key questions to guide the discussion. The conversations ranged from the generic exploration of notions of community engagement and government relationships with the community, to the specifics of organisational program implementation. All of the conversations were free-flowing and created space for individuals to share and build their knowledge of the importance of community engagement, to both the work they are responsible for and a broader level of institutional reform.

Each of the eight conversations commenced with an opening question to ascertain the community building framework utilised by the individual and the organisation they represented. Each conversation then progressed according to the issues which emerged and the particular interest of the participants (including the researcher) and tested emergent ideas from previous conversations.

Broadly, the conversations covered the following issues:

- level of understanding of community building as an approach with government
- knowledge of the state government’s community building framework
- work undertaken by DVC to progress a community building agenda
- application within the organisation of community building as a business strategy
• relationship between community building and communication strategies
• staff understanding and adoption of community building within the organisation
• difference between community building and community development
• social capital and what it means for government
• role of government departments and agencies in building social capital
• examples of the social building agenda by the organisation
• monitoring performance and how you account for social capital as a performance indicator
• setting budgets to facilitate community based outcomes
• doing community building work that takes staff beyond the remit of the organisation
• how departments and agencies might use a social capital agenda as a model for reform
• future of community building within a government context.

3.7 Data as text
Abductive reasoning was applied at the conclusion of each conversation to document ideas and highlights from each conversation. At the conclusion of the eight conversations, the data was transcribed and analysed with five themes as the framework in which to organise the data. The five themes were tested against the ideas derived from the literature review to ensure that the key concepts regarding community building were consistent.
The data available to the researcher was deep and complex as a consequence of eight one and a half hour conversations. The researcher commenced interpretation using “a dialectic process of condensation and integration” (Hallebone & Priest, 2009) to develop and refine the five themes and align data within the thematic structure.

The data was sorted against the five constructed themes, so that individual voices remained audible as well as commencing the framework for extracting meaning from the body of work (Appendices 3 - 7). In addition to being viewed as single strands of data, the collective body of thought represents a cacophony of information from which a gap in knowledge can be identified. The five themes provide the basis for understanding a view of community in two government portfolios at a point in time.

The five themes which emerged from the data generation, via extensive cross tabulation and word searches, were characterised as the following:

1. conceptual understanding of community strengthening
2. application of community engagement as an organising principle
3. benefits of community relationship to organisational delivery
4. organisational reform and community capacity building
5. future of government business and communities.

Thus the narrative emerged from the data as senior representatives from the public service engaged in dialogue about their organisations and community building principles.
It is clearly revealed by both the review of the literature and the conversation based data that the community building concepts applied within government are inconsistently understood and applied in the Environment and Transport portfolios within the Victorian Public Service. Each of the participants had a contribution to make in the context of the five themes and could articulate application within their own sphere and extrapolate to other parts of the bureaucracy.

The knowledge gap which emerged from analysis of the data is in understanding the importance of systemic communication as an underlying principle for sustainable community building activity. Different levels of knowledge, understanding and application were considered within the conversations but, when viewed as a collective body of knowledge, the overall gap was revealed. As this gap was also reflected in the review of the literature, the research question was able to be confirmed as the principal approach.

3.8 Clarity of understanding
Continuing to use the logic “of condensation and integration” (Hallebone & Priest, 2009) the themes were further analysed to sort the data into sub-themes from which typifications could be extracted.

Typification is utilised in this context as the meaning which can be drawn from the voices of the social actors. The five themes were established by the researcher as drawn from the empirical voices of the conversations and typifications
extracting deeper knowledge in attempting to understand what social actors mean by what they say.

Blaikie discusses typification as a way to “discover what a social actor ‘means’ by his or her action in contrast to the meaning that this action has for other social actors in the situation or for an outside observer” (Blakie, 2007, p.129).

The researcher tabulated the data under each of the five identified themes and searched for commonalities within and across the information (Appendix 8) in order to construct a number of typifications which put a spotlight on subterranean ideas and issues. Chapter 5 includes a summary of this work.

3.9 Methodological summary

The trajectory for this research is complex, as it includes the use of a number of paradigmatic assumptions to achieve the shift from the singular to the negotiated collective. The research methodology and strategy used enabled the data analysis to reveal a gap in the emphasis of knowledge when considering public sector community building programs. Interpretivism and structuration worked closely together for the empirical research and superimposing semiotics allowed the researcher to further analyse human constructions.

Chapter 4 will demonstrate similarities and differences through the findings from conversations through the work on typification, and serves to show the gap in application of the community building framework. Thus the researcher is led towards the proposal for a community communication system.
The methodology, design and reasoning applied throughout the research have enabled theory to emerge from the data to form the platform on which a discussion regarding community communication as a system can be undertaken. Chapter 5 attempts to apply the data and reasoning through the development of a community communication model.
Chapter 4
Findings

4 Findings

4.1 Introduction
This chapter focuses on the data derived from eight detailed conversations with senior representatives from government agencies in the Transport and Environment portfolios of the Victorian Public Service. As the data has been created as part of the development of community building strategies, the conversations have been interpreted by the researcher and findings have been identified from each conversation and from the whole body of work.

The conversations were broad ranging and supported by a few key concepts introduced by the researcher. Topic areas covered in each of the conversations included:

- understanding of the community building agenda espoused by the state government
- application of community building principles in the organisation
- examples of community building activity
- evidence of a policy framework utilised by the organisation to drive community activity
- role of community building as an organising principle for the organisation
- benefits realisation methods
- building a budget around community strengthening
• role of government agencies in facilitating community outcomes beyond the portfolio boundary
• nature of external relationships to deliver broad community outcomes
• change agenda inherent to a community empowerment or local decision making agenda

Five key themes have been extracted from the data and reported as findings; they are:

• conceptual understanding of community strengthening
• application of community engagement as an organising principle
• benefits of community relationship to organisational delivery
• organisational reform and community capacity building
• future of government business and communities

Each of the themes were built through the questions used as prompts throughout each of the conversations, and abductively from the data on generation of the data from each of the conversations. The literature revealed a gap in understanding of the role that social communication plays as part of the community engagement process and in the sustainable outcome of community strengthening. The creation of the themes as a way of organising and understanding the data is also a replication of the creative development process in public policy making. In both the political environment and the bureaucratic structure, policy is often formulated through the collection, collation and distillation of ideas.
Each of the themes are explored in this chapter through drawing out key points and highlighting points of convergence and divergence between the portfolios of Transport and Environment, and observations are made regarding alignment with government policy objectives regarding community building. The discussion around each theme attempts to build the body of knowledge developed by eight conversationalists (and the researcher) into a comprehensive dialogue regarding building community capacity through engagement by government.

The conceptual understanding of community strengthening (theme 1) attempts to distil a definition of community strengthening by providing data which moves through conversations, from a simple consultative understanding to discussion regarding the role of government organisations in building social capital. The discussion concludes with a definition of community strengthening that is supported through literature and the pragmatic responses of conversation participants. The application of community strengthening as an organising principle (theme 2) is an attempt to look within organisations to ascertain whether community agendas are driving the structure, organisation and prioritisation of the organisation. There was varied understanding among conversationalists regarding community aspiration as an organising principle and little acknowledgement that organisational design can be heavily influenced by the external world. Community requirements, therefore, did not feature heavily as the driving force for organisational structures or business decisions.

The benefits of community relationship to organisational delivery (theme 3) was a discussion, in the main, about the influence of communities on project implementation and the importance of staff adoption of community decision
making as a principle for design. The fourth theme, *organisational reform and community capacity building* although consistently raised throughout the conversations, did not yield new data or elicit innovative thinking around the issue. Most of the individuals were engaged in organisational reform but did not necessarily see communities as a catalyst for change nor as a compelling basis on which to consider organisational directions.

The *future of government business and communities* (theme 5) was an opportunity to explore organisational adoption of key principles of engagement, networked governance, decision-making partnerships and local participatory leadership. There is a body of theory and practice which supports community, networked governance as a model for the future; the portfolios of Environment and Transport seem to be late adopters of this model.

Quotations from participants have been used to consolidate ideas, highlight key concepts and interpret the conversations. The language used by participants was of particular interest, as it serves to contextualise each participant’s ideological perspective on the notion of communities.

The discussion chapter attempts to undertake a more detailed analysis of the meaning of the findings, using a semiotic framework to expose the meaning-making process and the importance of understanding the semiotic context in which meaning making in public places occurs.

Each of the participants who engaged in the process of discussion around community conversations for this research project are key decision makers within
their organisations and all have the opportunity to influence the service-delivery agenda of their particular organisation. Each of the participants comes from a long history of working in the public sector, most of them having worked within one organisational context for most of their working lives. Collectively, their understanding of community engagement as a concept and as a technique for undertaking government business has significant influence within the public sector.

There were no conversations initiated with the department responsible for leading on the community development agenda, as the researcher was interested in understanding, interpretation and action from agencies not accountable for policy formation. The Transport and Environment portfolios were selected as they are both influential and exist at both the program and policy levels within government. In addition to central policy-driven agendas, both portfolios also have statutory bodies delivering major parts of their portfolio business. Both transport and environment outcomes have direct and significant impact on the economic wellbeing, social fabric and spatial landscape of the state.

The abductive research strategy enabled the researcher to search for and identify themes when analysing the data. The five major themes have been selected for discussion as they were explored extensively and intelligently in each of the conversations. The identified themes were the discussion points of most interest in the discussions and thus of most interest to the researcher. The data generated from the conversations is collected and presented as themes on page 198. Throughout the following discussion, the quotations are directly lifted from the
conversations, whilst the comments by the author have been constructed through analysis and interpretation.

Each discussion commenced with the development of a joint understanding of the concept of community strengthening. There were various opinions regarding the meaning of community strengthening, with overall agreement that the act of community engagement has something to do with communication and community strengthening is about decision making. Less than half of the eight discussions described community engagement as a formal process for undertaking government business. The majority of the discussion focussed on the shift within government from formalised communication structures aimed at soliciting community compliance to a more informal relationship based communication between bureaucracy and general citizens.

All participants acknowledged that the process was an important component of building relationships with the general community and recognised that organisational objectives play a large part in how community conversations are administered:

*the most effective way of being assured that policy meets the needs of the community is not just undertaking market research about what their needs are, not just consulting them about policy proposals that other people have developed or come up with, but it’s another step to actually involve in the process right from the very beginning.* (Transport)

The language embodied in discourse among all participants exposes the level of understanding of individual participants, as well as creating a body of knowledge that can be used to build knowing among peers or colleagues. The way in which each person spoke about their understanding of community engagement
contributed to a body of knowledge regarding the concept of community engagement and the practical application of it within a bureaucratic delivery context. The dialogue has produced collective and individual meaning, all of which contributes to a greater level of knowledge about community building within the context of delivering the business of government.

It was generally agreed that building the knowledge and notion of social capital across government, as well as greater understanding of how government funding affects local communities, can contribute to government decision making driving the business of government.

4.2 Conceptual understanding of community strengthening
As highlighted in the review of the literature, the concepts of community engagement, community strengthening and community development exist within a social/political environment that has largely been driven by the not-for-profit sector. The not-for-profit sector has utilised community development principles as a specific discipline to build local capacity. Community development techniques used by the sector have been fundamental to service development and delivery in Victoria. Within government, the concepts behind the strengthening communities agenda articulate a process of activity (community development) and an outcome (stronger communities). As the concepts of process and outcome are used interchangeably throughout government documentation, there is often confusion around the intention embedded in the objective.
4.2.1 Government and community building

The role of government in the community development/strengthening business is still relatively new. The formation of the Department for Victorian Communities in 2004 consolidated the Victorian Government’s commitment to building stronger communities through targeted investment in community building activity, local capacity building, participation and volunteering, and addressing systemic disadvantage. Since that time, considerable effort has gone into establishing a solid evidence base and identifying and taking up opportunities to practice the new approach to government business.

Through investment directly in local communities, the Victorian Government has implemented a number of leading programs. Neighbourhood Renewal, run by the Department of Human Services, invests in areas that have high levels of public housing to build local participation and connectedness. The Community Renewal program was spawned from Neighbourhood Renewal, to target government intervention into communities outside the public housing context. Areas targeted for community renewal are urban locations deemed to need a kickstart to increase social and economic participation, which can be achieved through government investment. The program model includes community-driven governance arrangements and a willingness by the local community to lead a planning and investment process. Local councils usually serve as the auspice or umbrella and investments through the program must be able to demonstrate a return on investment for government through leveraging resources from private and philanthropic sources.
The machinery of government changes in Victoria in 2007 has seen the creation of the Department of Planning and Community Development and demonstrates the ongoing commitment to people and place. The spatial elements of land-use planning, combined with a community-driven investment approach, aim to achieve a long-term and comprehensive approach to locations experiencing entrenched disadvantage or significant growth.

Within the new department are two very different professional contexts in which business is undertaken. The land-use planning professionals generally view community development as a process that can enhance their planning activity. They perceive that community development activities will mitigate community anxiety around land use planning issues. They are seeking a smoother path for their planning system. On the other hand, the previous Department for Victorian Communities staff are comfortable articulating outcomes which arise from community development – social cohesion, local governance structures, local investment, less crime, increased wellbeing. The process of community development is viewed as having value and benefit, as the engagement processes bring communities together. Outcomes at the community level are difficult to attribute to the community building effort by state government or local councils, or community groups. The large number of variables make the corollary difficult to identify.

4.2.2 Community building discourse
The eight conversations held to create data for this research project articulated both ends of the continuum of the community engagement spectrum (Twyford, 2006). The more technically minded seem to view engagement with the
community as a component of the methodology to implement projects. Community engagement is viewed as an adjunct to decisions around infrastructure development and delivery. The opinion of the community is seen to be important in mitigating risk, hosing down opposition and declaring local ownership. Other discussions yielded a more complex understanding of community engagement as a key activity in stimulating dialogue, formulating solutions and jointly driving an agenda of change. Community engagement was often seen as the process through which capacity building, community planning and local governance are initiated and incubated.

Both the technical and community oriented participants in the eight conversations understood community engagement as a major feature within a broader communication effort.

*I think it's probably an overused term but...essentially...it's about is various levels and ways in which we might communicate, inform or engage with the community about what we're doing with public assets...it is about a dialogue, it's about the people with expertise making that available to the community so they understand the consequence of their decision (Environment)*

*community engagement is somewhere between community decision making and community consultation...consultation to me is sort of more a passive sort of approach, engagement to me is an active sort of listening (Transport)*

Community development as a method for conducting business seems to have a place in a networked approach to delivering government business. An approach to community development assumes a values base that recognises that all points of view are valid, that articulation is necessary and that collaborative engagement produces better results for the community as a whole.
The complexity around process and outcome is reflected within both the Environment and Transport portfolios as each seeks to use core community development concepts to deliver on their agenda in a changing environment.

The Transport portfolio in particular undertakes most of its business according to formulae, data and quantitative evidence. Decision making within the Transport portfolio relies heavily on using agreed rules around numbers of patrons, users, asset maintenance and robust investment logic. The culture of the portfolio and the professional training of staff tend to result in formulaic thinking which does not easily accommodate local or community-driven needs.

The arterial road network is a universal system based on the logic of moving people around a spatial environment. It is difficult to apply locally driven, capacity-building logic into a system which depends on statewide standards and data.

Individually, the eight conversations with key public-sector decision makers explored some of the concepts around the terminology – engagement, development and strengthening. There is a collective understanding that these linked concepts are an inherent part of the logic of investment in communities and should serve as the policy framework in which place based investment occurs.

4.2.3 Community engagement as process
Throughout each of the discussions, community engagement was defined as the process that government agencies utilise to seek community opinion and some
level of agreement regarding the way forward. The dialogue utilised ideas around asking people their opinion, seeking input and government hearing different ideas. In line with the land-use planning view of the world, each participant saw community interaction as a process for collecting information and modifying the outcome of an existing decision.

Some of the comments highlight the universal understanding that community engagement is a process:

> it’s really sort of becoming a worn out term because it is not a silver bullet or a one size fits all….how do we get more and more of the programs owned by the community.
> (Environment)

> it is the extent to which we involve the community in the development of policy.
> (Transport)

Overall there was limited discussion or comment on the notion of community strengthening and the role which government may play in building local capacity, establishing locally driven governance arrangements and the outcome of volunteering and participation activities. The discussion was limited to a process or project mitigation agenda and conversations explored ways of applying the community engagement activity to portfolio-based activity. There was some acknowledgement that a community of practice exists around community engagement implementation.

The language used throughout the conversations confirms that bureaucrats are looking to the external world as a reference, but direction and decision making come from within. Government departments may be getting better at communication, but not necessarily improving shared decision making.
4.2.4 Community engagement as dialogue
The discussions elucidated common agreement that community strengthening is achieved through conversations, discussion and dialogue and is fundamentally about identifying and responding to agendas. Some of the participants articulated the engagement process as the way in which business is undertaken, while others were limited to an exploration of community desires at a tactical level. The researcher detected no difference between the portfolios.

Agreement that the community agenda is about dialogue is an important point. The principle underpinning the community building agenda is that social communication is a complex system and network of articulation, response and activity. Community building is fundamentally about people. The logic in this instance is that investment is made with people in a specified place.

The conversations generally espoused the thought that the community strengthening agenda is broader than a process objective but has in common an acceptance that dialogue is the foundation.

4.2.5 Agreement on the meaning
Pragmatically, community strengthening operates as both a tactical tool to achieve outcomes as well as an ideological reformist method. Most of the participants interviewed for this project saw community engagement as a method for solving problems, for removing obstacles and to enable progress to occur. They saw community strengthening as an outcome or by-product of the engagement process or their own program implementation.
An understanding of the concept of community building drawn from individual discussions into a comprehensive understanding could be summarised with a definition of community development as the process by which organisations and their key clients and stakeholders join collectively to discuss and debate issues, and jointly propose a future trajectory.

The agreed definition includes assumptions regarding place-based conversations, networked discussions and public decision-making processes as key elements within a community building framework.

The variation in understanding of community strengthening, at a philosophical or tactical level, was subtle. The overall understanding of the key concepts of community engagement was consistent and comprehensive.

In particular, one respondent took the common understanding of community building a step further:

*Decision making in that you actually let the community decide what was the right outcome...they'd formulate the issues and they formulate and decide – we’ve never done that.* (Transport)

This sliver of discussion about a more sophisticated and clearly more complicated and risky strategy came from the Transport portfolio and reflects a new way of thinking about the motivation for building community engagement into business practice.
One final interesting point to note from these conversations is that the limited theoretical understanding of this agenda was reflected in a lack of definition between concepts. The terms ‘community engagement’, ‘building’, ‘strengthening’ and ‘development’ were used interchangeably, with little regard for either their historical or their contemporary usage.

4.3 Application of community engagement as an organising principle

Although constructed as a free-flowing conversation, each of the discussions included some reflection by participants (including the interviewer/facilitator) on their organisational response to a community strengthening objective. Each participant was asked to describe how community engagement worked in their organisation, including the objective, framework and/or model that the organisation has adopted.

4.3.1 Communities and organisational response

Overall, organisational structure was deemed the manifestation of the community engagement agenda. Descriptions of individual organisational responses to working with the community stemmed from varied belief systems underpinning the major objectives of the individual department or agency. Responses by portfolio representatives provide a broader understanding of the underlying assumptions regarding organisations and communities. A representative from the Transport portfolio described a statewide system which needed to include community representation at the policy development stage, and balance local needs against broader social aspiration in the implementation of activity to manage the transport networks.
So we just basically tried to free up a bit in terms of the discussion that was occurring so at least people's needs and views...could be worked on. (Environment)

All four participants from Transport strongly expressed a desire to engage more fully but not compromise the integrity of the road, rail or tram network.

I mean we absolutely hide from the community, we would build up a solution or some options that we might then go out there with but there would be a whole lot of work done, and then sign off the stakeholders, the main one being government. Then we would go out with an answer that we would be so locked into, that it won't matter too much what the community says. Change it at the margins but it would be absolutely at the margins. So a true community engagement we would probably got out in the first place and find out what people actually thought about the network in that area. (Transport)

The descriptors expressed through the discussions on transport do not indicate an approach designed to deliver an ‘enabled state’ but an authorising environment that utilises communities to mitigate risk and facilitate the smooth delivery of government business. An approach which embraced social capital as a key outcome of bureaucratic engagement with communities would see the Transport portfolio connected locally for both policy development and service delivery. You would expect the portfolio to express a more considered approach to working with communities to achieve broader social objectives. Interestingly, the delivery of the road network through VicRoads has a very close connection to the community through the regional structure and the business planning process, but still does not articulate community capacity or social capital building as part of its responsibility.

During one part of the discussion it became clear the there was considerable awareness that the approach to working with the community was compromised:

There's no real model in the organisation. In fact it's probably fair to say...credibility in regional Victoria is crap...understanding of what it's trying to achieve is absolutely totally void and we have to fix that. (Transport)
The Environment portfolio discussion elucidated a greater awareness of the need for community engagement and expressed social capital as a by-product of the engagement strategy. Overall discussions regarding community engagement as an organising principle were scientific – the organisational structure was designed with communities in mind and the land management content of the portfolio put more closely in touch with communities. A deliberate attempt to recognise the traditional owners of our land and fully engage them in management practice was seen as a fundamental plank in the community engagement structure of the organisation.

I tend to see if you look at Victoria broken up into a series of communities of interest, and that can be geographic, it can be the Mallee or it can be right through to a particular interest group”, “…we work with them to understand better what their objectives are, them understanding what our objectives are and where everybody can narrow down the gap and where we have our sort of conflict or difference of opinion. (Environment)

I think a regional structure is terrific for the majority of it because it’s mostly about place. (Environment)

Compared to the transport regional structure, the environment participation framework is more heavily reliant on the centre. Senior positions are located in head office and local responsiveness is determined on a project by project basis. Working with the community was rarely expressed as building social capital or building community capacity – in fact it was described as necessary to ensure the future of the portfolio:

At a corporate level we actually do have a partnerships branch…because our view would be that (we) only exist to the extent that government’s support (us) and that only exists to the extent that community support (us). (Environment)
Surprisingly, someone from the Environment portfolio expressed organisational community engagement principles as personal adoption by individual staff:

*It’s not a conscious strategy but I think it’s in the back of minds of people because they more often than not live there and are part of it as well.* (Environment)

*Our staff are part of the community out there. So we need to demystify this whole community engagement stuff…it’s in our language but no one’s been able to do much other than that apart from projects.* (Environment)

A systematic approach to embedding social capital building as an outcome and community engagement principles as a way of doing business was not evident across the Environment portfolio. The organisational response is personal, embedded in place and seen as essential for the long-term survival of the portfolio.

### 4.3.2 Community framework

The limited approach to a framework for community building was evident throughout both the Transport and Environment portfolios. No one identified that there was an approach by government which could be adopted as an organisational principle and used to drive government business. Through Parks Victoria, the structure of the organisation and therefore the delivery of the program offers a way forward in regard to the alignment of organisational objectives with community aspiration, and the VicRoads regional structure and reliance on local information to formulate the roads program is a good example of engagement practice (mostly with local councils).

Interestingly, each of the portfolio representatives were able to provide evidence of community engagement practice within their organisations, but did not link
the community activity to the broader government agenda of building social capital.

On that job we made it a definite decision to actually get people to understand or articulate and understand the issue then help us to develop the solutions to the issues, and that to me is community engagement. (Transport)

I don't think we have a model…we have a philosophy that we want to be talking to the community and involved in the community and we want more of that rather than less of that. (Transport)

They tend to be interactions with us…contacts we might have and even through local government, but we haven't got the formal mechanisms in engaging the community in putting that program together in the first place. (Environment)

The discussions on the application of community engagement ranged from an understanding that the concept was dependent on particular individuals with a personal commitment, to a belief that there was no agreed model or process but examples of activity, through to a description of a model and its application across the organisation. Within the organisations themselves, there were numerous examples of positive engagement with the community at a number of levels – Brambuk, Bicycle strategy, Catchment Management Authorities, Muslim Women's licensing program.

There were a number of comments which indicate that individual organisations within the Transport and Environment portfolios are starting to consider an organisational response to community, and to ruminate on the notion of community capacity building and their roles in that as providers of government services.

I don't know if I've written it down but it's certainly articulated in probably a combination of written and verbal. But again it's not a 20 page document and it needs to be responsive. (Environment)
we’re now realising it is actually essential for the delivery of the core of what we want to have delivered so what’s absent from community building across government as a strategy I think is a regional strategy or regional development strategy. (Environment)

Our staff generally understand that community engagement doesn’t mean you give the community what they want…it’s about a dialogue. (Environment)

it’s not a model that’s been designed in a backroom, it’s kind of like you’ve got to do it because the community’s demanding that you talk to them…we’ll design it as we go. (Environment)

Each of the conversations, and therefore each of the organisations, demonstrate an understanding of the need for an agreed model and the application of practice within their organisation. All provided examples of processes and projects that have a community engagement methodology built into the design. All agreed that staff skills in engagement and representation are necessary and need development across the sector.

There is a tenuous link between the government’s community capacity building agenda and the responsibilities of portfolio delivery. Community building, engagement and capital as principles guiding organisations within the Transport and Environment portfolios are limited to a body of practice and some organisational arrangements.

4.4 Benefits of community engagement to organisational delivery

Discussions around the benefits of community engagement focussed on the particular benefits to organisational delivery and the changes to processes that community engagement can bring. The conversations covered two main areas of concern: improved outcomes; and improved relationships. Participants were able
to articulate and describe current benefits and potential benefits achieved through a more robust community engagement method.

The differences within the portfolios become evident within this component of the discussions, with the Environment portfolio placing substantial emphasis on community contact as the touchstone for policy development and service delivery. There are well developed reporting mechanisms within the customer service delivery framework of both portfolios – the registration and licensing business administered through VicRoads, and community access to parks administered through Parks Victoria. The Transport portfolio demonstrated a reliance on community feedback as one of the measures for good project management. Each transport project has a well developed community consultation program aimed at providing ongoing information about a project and offering opportunities for community input into local decisions.

The delivery of programs, projects and services was deemed a high priority for each of the organisations within the portfolio areas of Transport and Environment. The discussions centred around whether community engagement principles and methods had contributed to improved delivery within the organisation.

4.4.1 Improving delivery
When discussing delivery, the Transport portfolio had differing but frank views of the value of community engagement in the delivery of statewide transport systems:
you’ve got much more flexibility in service delivery than you have in infrastructure delivery…the project job in terms of community engagement and consultation was about how do we do it. (Transport)

the outcome would be, we would end up with interventions that would be aligned with community expectations and community needs. (Transport)

One brave soul posed a position contrary to all others:

I don’t believe that what we’re doing will change the benefits one bit…I think, the process is more, and what will happen is we think we will generate some information for both the community and council that will be of value to them in other ways. (Transport)

Unknowingly, this discussion led toward building social capital as a government objective and the expectation that all parts of the bureaucracy will contribute to an outcome broader than their own portfolio:

I suspect the benefits to the project would have been no different if we had done it the conventional way. The benefits hopefully are that the project is providing broader benefits…give people the chance to air the broader issues. (Transport)

Other discussions regarding the benefit of community engagement to delivery were around internal mechanisms, with some seeing community engagement as an input which forces the organisation to better align its business activities and stimulate organisational reform:

what we are doing now has linked this community engagement work with our end to end project management work so that the communications and community engagement has to be thought about as part of the resourcing and delivery of our projects and everyone’s talking the talk. (Environment)

The alignment of community engagement principles with organisational reform assumes that the organisation is responding to external stimuli and that service delivery is improved as a result.
There was no qualitative evidence that community engagement is improving delivery within any of the organisations included in this study, although a significant number of interviewees felt that a smoother implementation trajectory was directly attributable to the community engagement method employed throughout projects. Overall, this understanding of community engagement was contained to the confines of portfolio responsibility – the understanding of delivery was centred around portfolio accountabilities.

4.4.2 Community-based relationships
Throughout numerous discussions attention centred on the improved relationships that have been achieved as the result of a community engagement process. There seems to be an inherent assumption that improved relationships have value in their own right and are not required to be connected to improved outcomes. Stretching the understanding a little further, some conversations seemed to be suggesting that relationship improvement was itself an outcome valued and measured by government and individual departments and agencies.

There was a number of comments from within the Transport portfolio that recognised that, even though the technical treatment may have been the same regardless of the engagement method, the value lay in the future. It was evident that the project management ethos within the Transport portfolio is able to accept that an investment in communities may yield results at some later date – either for the same project or more broadly within the portfolio.

The Environment portfolio discussions relied heavily on the relationship between staff and communities as evidence that engagement with the community is
contributing to improved outcomes, particularly around relationship and stakeholder management.

*Because what you get is a couple of things. You get your staff beginning to realise that groups aren’t horrible nasty people, actually normal people like you and I.* (Environment)

*cos our staff are part of the community out there. So we need to demystify this whole community engagement stuff. A lot of it’s about, people who are naturally good at it and don’t need a lot of training.* (Environment)

This link between community engagement and the staff as community members is particularly strong in the delivery component of the Environment portfolio. The messages from the Environment portfolio are based on an understanding of existing regional arrangements but still seem to be tied to an individual’s desire and skill to engage the community, rather than being constructed as a key component of the organisation’s structure.

All conversations seemed to assume that community engagement is necessary as service or project delivery and that sometimes rewards around relationship and risk mitigation have been achieved. There was no overwhelming support for the idea that community engagement achieved better outcomes for government and the community, and limited discussion around the notion of partnership and power sharing. In fact, some discussions demonstrated extreme hesitation about participative democracy and its implications for achieving the tasks by which the organisation is ultimately measured.

### 4.4.3 Reporting community benefit

Another learning throughout the discussions is the notion that individuals understood that their organisation should be paying more attention to building
social capital and integrating community aspiration within their program design. The expectation that program improvements can be achieved through community input was articulated within the context of broader government objectives. All participants indicated that their current processes could be improved, in particular from a traditional consultative process to a community partnership approach.

One important discussion which emerged within each conversation was the concept that articulated benefits can be described through traditional bureaucratic monitoring and reporting systems but because there is limited methodology around reporting ‘soft’ outcomes, agencies did not include community benefit in their output statements:

*if we can’t measure in hard numbers then we don’t tend to do it…I think we’re only just starting to accept that we need some qualitative measure that we get a feel for how, and it is a feel for how it’s going…I don’t think we’ve done anything that I would describe as measuring connectedness.* (Transport)

*It’s not a specific reporting item. We’re reporting against either sort of internal costs, that is staff overheads, or projects or contracts.* (Transport)

*Much more natural, it’s not an artificial process, it’s a much more natural process, because we are dealing with things that are vitally important.* (Environment)

*we’re staring to capture the dollar value of the community contribution and then there’s the contribution of agreement to moving ahead so that you get a strategic outcome.* (Environment)

Clearly the reporting of community engagement is being undertaken as an input to policy development, service delivery and project implementation. None of the participants reported community engagement or connectedness as an output at the corporate table. Some indicated that they only achieve corporate discussion on community output when there is a problem needing an organisational
decision. Most respondents focussed on the fact that they are not reporting community connectedness and cannot articulate how or why they would do so.

So, even in the Environment portfolio where community engagement is more likely to be seen as a necessary part of the process of management, limited formal reporting is being undertaken. An interpretation of this in some discussions was around the overall acceptance by the community that investment decisions are the property of elected governments, not bureaucrats or agencies of government.

An interesting benefit articulated in a number of conversations occurred around the notion that community engagement as a technique is a key component of organisational positioning or stakeholder management. Within the conversations, no-one used the theoretical concept of stakeholder management or public positioning, but for some a longer term strategy was in their minds.

> So they’ve probably pushed us further than we really wanted to be for the project but hopefully there’s a broader benefit. (Transport)

> You start losing community support and you are eventually going to threaten the entire concept…so our view is that we need a broad community support for the…system in order to maintain and grow it. (Environment)

> It’s a very clear and conscious choice on our part to get broader community support. (Environment)

Some of the participants saw that some of the benefits in community engagement are around public acceptance and support, as well as managing individual projects through a public process. This understanding seems to place the organisation in a wider, more global context, a context in which sustainable futures are envisioned only with the vision of others. Perhaps government
agencies, in their shift from rules based management to networked management, have already adopted key principles from the community building agenda.

4.5 Organisational reform and community capacity building

Each conversation was underpinned by assumptions that organisational reform within the public sector is both inevitable and ongoing. Each discussion contained references to new ways in which business is undertaken and recognition that community expectations are changing. There were numerous references to the fact that government is in the process of evolving from a universal, rules-based theory to a collaborative, networked approach.

*people in the public service are not good at sharing.* (Environment)

*the Secretary gives the money and says 'I want to buy community engagement outcomes.* (Environment)

*some staff…still think 'I'm the only one who can do it. I'm the only person who is authorised – and here's a bit of legal paper that says it’…But over time you get rid of that attitude.* (Transport)

*we’ve always had our face turned to protect…now we’ve got to turn around and see what’s coming.* (Environment)

These discussions were not homogeneous, and many expressed difficulties in managing increased community participation in decision making, even though there was philosophical agreement with the concept.

*there is a risk that any model we put in place isn’t fully representative that you get the zealots, the people that have single issues to push or their own personal barrows involved in the process, unless you’re very, very careful.* (Transport)

*were you taken by surprise or were you part of it, do you have a sense of satisfaction….do you think we’re alert and we’re paying attention, have your concerns met by some of this, you may not like it but do you understand it.* (Environment)
One visionary saw community engagement as being as important as the budgetary process:

*that community acceptance of projects would be measured just as we do budgets, and timeframes and so on. We would probably be looking at the community benefits. The community would decide what the measures would be, and then probably decide whether we met them or not. So, do the scoring, do the setting, the parameters in the first place and then the scoring.* (Transport)

This utopian participant noted the inherent difficulty with the process:

*The projects don’t get set from the point of view of engaging the community on what they want before you actually define the project because it’s so inter-linked with government policy and funding.* (Transport)

In this discussion the participant took the position that agencies are there to deliver on government policy, and that large decisions about infrastructure investment are already made by government before the organisation has a chance to enable a community engagement methodology. The conclusion therefore is that the community engagement activity starts from a project implementation perspective.

This understanding of bureaucracy as an implementer of government policy is simplistic, in that it fails to recognise the role agencies have in formulating policy and providing government with advice regarding future outcomes. This view articulates participatory governance as separate from government administration.

It is pure interpretation of the governance structure of government administration in Victoria, compared to a more pragmatic view which includes a networked, problem-solving approach to community issues in which solutions are developed by bringing all the skills and knowledge around the table.
A more recent understanding of bureaucratic participation in policy formation considers key concepts such as the enabled state, a knowledge-based view of the organisation and a networked approach which is reliant on the market, the community and government to design for the future. The connection between organisational reform and community capacity building was not evident in most of the discussions. Individuals saw organisational reform as needed to improve outputs or increase efficiency, not to achieve reform in the way government delivers services.

Many of the conversations centred around community building as a new agenda for government:

*I think it’s more than just rhetoric it’s a government that truly wants communities to be a part.* (Environment)

*The risk we run now…we’ve built up a better informed community about what are the real issues and what needs to be done but then no-one grabs that for the next six months.* (Environment)

*I’d like to think that we could have a role in having communities more informed about transport type issues so they can actually be involved in the discussions.* (Transport)

*I don’t know what it would look; like specifically but I’m pretty sure that there would be mechanisms in place for us to be much closer to the community that we are at the present time.* (Transport)

While understanding the rationale and objectives behind the community capacity building agenda, individuals within organisations indicated that it is difficult to see how these might influence their agenda and their organisation into the future. Many had not considered decision-making partnerships with communities, nor factored local participatory governance arrangements into their organisational view of the world.
Even though organisational reform was a key feature of the discussions, it was not driven by the desire to build communities. People did express an interest in the future and their role in building communities for the future:

*about building community capacity, trying to recognise that we have a role in that.* (Transport)

*We’re trying to get everyone to engage.* (Environment)

*It could mean that we come up with a completely different set of recommendations to the government about what the program should be...to a certain extent it simply assumes that the kind of input that we would be getting would come up with a different result.* (Transport)

Some of this discussion focused on the dilemma for the government administrator. Even though community engagement was declared to be positive, how do portfolio-based agencies continue the dialogue with the community when the content or topic is not within their silo or expertise? Raising expectations and then maintaining a sense of moving forward with a community when resources and attention are focussed on the next project, product or policy was seen as an impediment to embracing community building as a principle. There was clearly a desire for a broader approach across government to ensure that individual agencies were not saddled with a community aspiration which they could not hope to deliver on.

There was considerable hesitancy, particularly within the Transport portfolio, around the risks:

*there is a risk that any model....unless you are very, very careful.* (Transport)

but recognition that the processes and outcome may be different:

*To a certain extent it simply assumes that the kind of input we would be getting would come up with a different result.* (Transport)
While thinking about the future of their organisations and community engagement, a number of interesting comments were made:

*it is often a problem with government or government agency, if you become too short sighted, if you’re worrying about putting out the spot fires you’ll get your ass burned at some stage.* (Environment)

*Now one of the key selection criteria is an ability to converse and engage with people because we don’t……because we know better because we’ve got qualifications and we’re technical.* (Environment)

These comments reflect a diverse response to the notion of organisational change and demonstrate that there is not a strong link between change and a community engagement agenda.

There was some discussion on facing organisations into the external world, instead of the traditional internal-facing public service:

*we always have this technical hat on and we justify not doing anything by having the technical hat on whereas true community engagement is forgetting the technical side, how’s it seen by others and then perhaps you’ve got to, if you can understand what they’re saying, do something about it.* (Transport)

*we’ve always had our face turned to protect…now we’ve got to turn around and see what’s coming.* (Environment)

An interesting observation on how to achieve community objectives in a bureaucratic environment:

*cos all the money is tied up in program outcomes…and they see that as an add on or a support outcome…The money should be handed out by the secretary not the program people.* (Environment)

The conversations on organisational reform and community engagement did not yield great insight into how parts of government may be utilising community engagement as part of reform. There was some acknowledgement that implementing community-based tactics into operational activities would result in
some organisational reform, but it did not seem to be a considered strategy. Only in one discussion did the representative speak about publicly positioning the organisation to enhance its power base.

4.6 Future of government and community engagement

The conversations were reasonably well informed about the social policy framework and its focus on community as a key government objective, and participants made mention of a significant international body of practice and evidence to achieve greater alignment between community and government aspirations, and that administrators will need to become adept at eclectic and flexible leadership approaches. As policy makers, government bureaucracies will need to engage widely, early and continuously to ensure that a polycentric approach to the identification of issues and possible solutions is front and centre of policy development.

The discussions elucidated considerable variation in the conversational components which focussed on government and institutional reform. In some conversations the long-term future of government was only lightly touched on, while in others it became the focal point.

A number of the discussions held a historical position:

I think there was starting to be a sense of a need for change and a need to engage the community because of the pace of change over the decade...population change, erosion of community services, the closure of some parts of government, branches of government within reach of localities... '99 sort of ratified everyone that the community had spoken about the way they wanted to be engaged and that you don’t do things to them, you have to listen to them, you have to connect to them. (Environment)
There was a clear understanding that community engagement as an ideological methodology within government has evolved and is continuing to develop as adoption increases throughout government departments and agencies:

“I think the world is changing and I think the way in which we interact with not just the community but our stakeholders and the stakeholders are probably part of the community, is evolving and changing over time as well, and no longer can governments get away with simply saying we know what’s best”. (Environment)

Timing around the change agenda was understood differently:

I think there will be a government imperative for us to change, so it will be an interesting time. (Transport)

I think we recognise that is something that we have a government responsibility to do now. (Environment)

Some conversations did not recognise that bureaucracies have already commenced the process of change:

I think it partly needs to evolve because at the end of the day, like all things that are community driven, they’ll ultimately decide. (Transport)

whereas others noted the existing trajectory:

they didn’t try and turn it on its head, that we heard them and we picked up on the things they valued and we built that into a strategic direction. (Transport)

Overall there was a sense that change is occurring, albeit slowly in some parts of government. Some conversations recognised the government commitment to building communities through the creation of the Department for Victorian Communities (subsequently the Department of Planning and Community Development) and noted the body of work that the new department has been building.
Considering community engagement as a tool for achieving institutional reform featured in a number of discussions, most particularly as a consideration regarding the future of government:

*I’d like to think that the big change, maybe in five years, there’s more information flowing in influencing our directions and then us flowing information out and trying to convince people that what we’re doing is right.* (Transport)

There is still a cautious note of control around convincing and managing, captured neatly by the statement

*Not complete power, shared power.* (Transport)

There was recognition that the very structure of government diminishes community connectedness as an institutional reform tool:

*We’re very good at reporting outputs...it really is an issue for government not for individual organisations because outcomes are inevitably not separated by silos of government departments and I think one of the biggest encumbrances to actually reporting outcomes...very few outcomes are reported, they’re usually about outputs if you’re lucky.* (Environment)

Extrapolating from this comment, one could draw conclusions that current efforts around whole-of-government actions are a step in the right direction if governments are to articulate overall benefits for the community. In this model, departments are a problem because they are only expected to report against portfolio measures and no community outcomes are reported as stand alone achievements.

There was a number of examples provided where bureaucrats across the public sector had joined together at a program level to achieve greater leverage for communities. Recent examples include the School Regeneration program, which aims to make highest use of all community and government facilities, and
programs such as Community Renewal investing in communities identified by the government through other programs such as Neighbourhood Renewal.

The issue of outcomes for the community is further complicated by an overlay of local versus statewide outcomes. Within the conversations, there were many descriptions of when statewide needs outweighed local needs from economic, social and environmental perspectives:

At the end of the day there’s always got to be a balance based on some… the decision has got to be statewide, it’s just got to be. (Transport)

Decisions made within and by government consider overall benefits, sustainability and economic growth and clearly take a statewide perspective, but the experience of bureaucrats is focussed at the local level:

Because quite frankly every person I talk to is worried about what is happening outside their front door. They couldn’t give a rat’s arse what is happening in the neighbouring municipalities. How the hell do you get together a group that is representative of the community? I know I was frustrated out of my brain trying to get together a genuine regional reference group. (Transport)

Managing the fine line between local and state needs was expressed as a difficult juggling act that is played out in public places. There are tools and avenues built into the state planning process for local needs to be addressed within the statewide agenda, most obviously through local government, panel hearings, advisory bodies and the Victorian Civic Administrative Tribunal. It seems that the fear for some is around the level of information community members can utilise to state their case:

in terms of access and information, you’ve got to look at the generations … as people get more and more hungry for information over the net, there’s going to be a lot more information leaks through that medium than probably even now. (Transport)

although some saw a positive side:
I’d like to think that communities were more informed so that they can actually take part in some of those discussions. (Transport)

All the discussions around the issues of access to information were unpinned by a belief that:

they get access which is healthy for a democracy. (Environment)

It seems that conclusions around resolving state and local needs are played out through the planning processes, community consultation activities and ultimately through the election of governments. The combination of bureaucracies and government representatives helps to resolve issues on behalf of the whole community, leading to compromise and adjustment:

I believe our task is too big for us ‘cos it’s about creating middle ground so we can then demonstrate the central government. (Environment)

In terms of the future of institutional reform in the government sector, there were a range of opinions focussed on opening bureaucracies to the external world:

I’d like to think that some …that the groups we call advisory groups at the moment, would be much more active in terms of informing and consulting with the people they supposedly represent. (Transport)

We need to know it but we need to be prepared to adjust depending on the circumstances so that we don’t end up with a design that’s actually not going to fulfil the needs. (Transport)

we’ve become aware of the fact that there are expectations out there that we ought to be doing more and so we’ve actually got to get out to the community. (Environment)

People are definitely noting that staff in organisations need to adopt an external focus, not the traditional inward, protectionist stance which bureaucracies automatically adopt.
In terms of possible future structures or arrangements between government agencies and communities, the discussions mostly concluded the following:

*I think the key will be to simply involve the community in the decision making process.* (Transport)

*I firmly believe that you get best value out of any relationship by simply getting to know the players at a personal level and then things just come through.* (Transport)

The suggestion that the future role and form of government will need to be more closely aligned with community aspiration was echoed throughout the eight conversations:

*part of the role of government will be putting the framework in place and the checks and balances.* (Environment)

## 4.7 Summary

Each conversation occurred as a stand-alone discussion regarding community engagement as an ideology, an implementation tool and an agent of reform. The consequence of eight discussions is a collected body of knowledge which provides an indication of direction within the Transport and Environment portfolios within the Victorian Public Service.

Conclusions drawn from the findings indicate that there is agreement across the two portfolios on the conceptual understanding of community engagement. Through the consolidation of ideas and comments, community engagement can broadly be defined as the process for having conversation and discussion to create dialogue, which in turn develops meaning and knowledge in public places at a community level. Generally, organisations in the Transport and Environment portfolios are undertaking community engagement activities, some within an agreed methodology, others without a framework. All participants described
community engagement activities at a project level, while two described a more global organisational position.

All conversations concluded that benefits for the community are around a sense of involvement and an opportunity to influence an output, and benefits for bureaucrats are in improved local knowledge and better quality relationships with the local communities they work with. There was not a strong feeling that changed outputs have been a result of community engagement processes.

Drawing knowledge and energy from the external world was the major conclusion from the discussions around organisational change. Traditionally, public sector organisations have been driven by rules and regulation and have adopted an inward, protectionist stance regarding the information they are the custodians of and the process by which they deliver services. There has clearly been a paradigm shift where public sector organisations view themselves as outward facing, responsive to the external world and driven by individualised rather than homogenised needs. The tension in this model is the need for governments to make decisions based on overall social, economic and environmental considerations.

Overall, conversation participants shared a view of the future where communities are better informed and able to participate equally in public dialogue on issues, policies and projects. All agreed that the unplanned benefit of engagement was improved relationships within communities and between communities and bureaucracies. There was limited understanding of building social capital as a result of using engagement activities and limited discussion around the notion of
place as a logic for government investment. The shared future included an improved articulation of community outcomes, rather than silo or department-based budgeting and reporting. This poses an interesting question about the structure of government departments or, more importantly, throws into doubt the current strategies for purchasing community outcomes.

Within the discussions, there was a sense that dialogue is a public activity. Staff in government agencies and community representatives are expected to participate in public dialogue to raise and solve issues. The tools required by individuals to achieve an enabled skill level are being practised within organisations as part of an iterative learning process, rather than organisational reform. Individuals within organisations are being utilised to undertake engagement, rather than there being a commitment to improving the public participation skills of both bureaucrats and community representatives.

The discussion chapter explores a number of the key themes identified in the participant conversations and proposes that a policy framework which aims to achieve community building must contain a number of principles clearly understood and embedded within the articulation of the model. Community building relies on civic participation – communities must be engaged and encouraged to become sustained civic participants. Community building relies on meaning making in public places – communities must be skilled at the business of participation. Government leadership in community building needs to ensure a broad understanding of social communication systems in order to build the capacity of communities. Bureaucrats need a greater understanding of social capital building and the connection between the public and private meaning –
making systems of communities. Bureaucracies and governments need to embrace an eclectic and flexible approach to community engagement in order to successfully invest in place.

The findings drawn from the research cover three main areas:

• the inconsistent application of logic for community strengthening in the two portfolios considered in the research
• the reform of government business is not intellectually contextualised by an understanding of social capital as a major outcome to be achieved through implementation
• communication is not recognised as a foundation principle in policy or practice.

The issue of communication seems to be the missing link in both the policy framework for community strengthening and the practice which is applied in the Environment and Transport portfolios in the Victorian Public Service. Modern relationships between two or more parties are the result of a sophisticated negotiation which must include a signification communication effort to make it work.

The focus of further work in this thesis lay on integrating an approach to communication with the community strengthening policy framework and community development practice.
Chapter 5
Towards a model of community communications

5 Towards a model of community communication

5.1 Introduction
This chapter builds on the literature review and empirical data to propose the notion that, in attempting to implement sustainable community engagement structures, a number of government agencies have missed the importance of communication as a key element. The following discussion aims to build the logic to propose a model of community communication which could be adopted as a component of the community building method utilised across the public service in Victoria.

Two major points arise from the following discussion which are the basis on which an approach to communication may be considered as a fundamental component of a community building logic:

1. There was limited evidence of understanding that community building activity is contextualised within a government reform agenda and that community engagement commences the process of building social capital; and

2. The community communication model, which utilises a combination of community engagement methods and semiotic structures, provides a range of tools for reforming the way in which government works.
The following discussion attempts to bring together the threads which have been explored throughout the review of the literature, the eight conversations and exploration of the findings, in order to suggest a model of community communication which can be used for further development in this field.

5.2 Themes and ideas

5.2.1 Enlightened bureaucrats
Prior to the discussion regarding consideration of the future, it seems timely to reflect on the eight conversations with senior bureaucrats and the insight those discussions can have on our understanding of community communication as a concept.

Each of the eight discussions provided an organisation based response and possible strategy for the way forward. Remembering that the process of elucidating data mimics the community engagement process and should therefore be treated as occurring with a community communication context, collectively the body of dialogue holds the key to understanding a response to community communication and a way forward in a new paradigm.

It seems that the data constructed throughout each of the eight conversations emerges with five key themes which could be the elements of a strategy for addressing community communication at an organisational level.

Chapter four has provided the data constructed from each of the eight detailed conversations. Each conversation followed a unique trajectory, from which emerged five key themes.
The themes explored in the findings chapter are as follows:

- conceptual understanding of community strengthening
- application of community engagement as an organising principle
- benefits of community relationship to organisational delivery
- organisational reform and community capacity building
- future of government business and communities

5.2.2 Conceptual understanding

A generally agreed definition of community engagement emerged from the conversations. The definition is supported by the literature (as documented in chapter two). At a conceptual level, the definition of community engagement is the process by which organisations and their key clients and stakeholders join collectively to discuss and debate issues, and jointly propose a future plan for action. The outcome encapsulates the concept of a strengthened community. There are a number of measures used by the Department for Victorian Communities which provide an indicator of community strength (Victorian Government, 2009).

Making meaning in public places is the process of creating dialogue that is meaningful to all participants. As evidenced by this research project, the process of creating meaning is (absolutely) fundamental to achieving connection and understanding. In this instance, the way meaning was made was through individual conversations which built a body of knowledge around the topic of community engagement. Each participant left the conversation with a little more
knowledge and greater clarity around community engagement processes and community capacity or social capital accumulation as the broader objective of government. The process of dialogue created the knowledge. Sharing ideas and stories created knowledge and understanding between two people. In a community context, this process is shared and duplicated by all participants, often in small clusters or larger, more public processes.

The conceptual, or definitional, understanding among the conversations was diverse. Some conversations articulated a very sophisticated understanding of notions of building community capital, government power-sharing arrangements and the future of government. In contrast, in one conversation the proponent basically said that government already does this when required.

For those readers with an understanding of the structure of the Victorian Public Service, the participants came from two inner budget departments and two statutory authorities. The statutory authorities are, in theory, part of the community strengthening agenda which aims to have government close to the community, evidenced by the regionally based organisational structures in place. One of the inner budget departments has a well developed regional structure, while the other is extremely limited. There is a question not answered in this research project about decision making within the organisation – is it head office making decisions and regions implementing them, or is there decision making across the organisation?

In contrasting one portfolio against another, it seems that the Environment portfolio holds a well developed theoretical understanding of community
engagement but its application varies. There were limited examples of community engagement activity that were not occurring in response to an issue or a project. Two conversations (from the same organisation) described a survival requirement that was driving their commitment to community engagement. Both conversations articulated a strategic need to include community conversations and power sharing as part of their organisational persona.

Interestingly, two conversations within the Environment portfolio described community engagement as an innate skill within the workforce. In fact, one participant said there was too much mystery around community engagement and it really requires staff with good people skills. This view does not recognise that working with the community is a skill set that could be harnessed and cultivated within the organisation to achieve a different relationship with communities. Confining the activity to a personal skill or response limits the capacity of communication and engagement skills as transformational activities within the organisation.

The Transport portfolio had less success than Environment in describing community engagement, as it could only ever relate activity to a specific project. The strong project focus, a feature of engineering or technically based organisations, reduces the outcome of an organisation to a list of activities or a set of tasks, rather than a cohesive shift of effort into a new paradigm. Interestingly, all four transport-related conversations demonstrated a shared and strong understanding of the community engagement process, but did not see community driven agendas as part of the reform of their portfolio or the way in which government works.
The differences between individuals within portfolios were minor. Even though both portfolios indicated a regional structure, no conversation identified that the regional structure was a deliberate choice in their community relationship model. References to regional structures focussed on the staff and their personal relationships within the community to respond to issues on behalf of the organisation and to provide intelligence to the corporate organisation regarding local issues.

5.2.3 Organising principle

The second theme of the application of community engagement in the organisation was as diverse as the organisations and individuals themselves. Each of the four Environment conversations discussed concrete examples of community engagement in action. Each could cite examples, outcomes and benefits in relation to specific issues or specific stakeholder groupings. Two conversations in particular focused on notions of place and interest based communities and the difficulties of finding and engaging with metamorphic structures. Interestingly, the Transport portfolio provided many more examples that were tied to place-based activity. Even though there were many more examples in Transport, all were project related. There was no evidence that community engagement structures are being established to build capacity-based relationships. One Transport conversation indicated that community engagement forums have been tried and have never really worked well because community members do not have much to talk about unless there is a local issue.
The discussions around application focussed on internal skills and the organisation’s use of those skills. It seems that the skills exist within the domain of a particular type of individual and the organisation uses those skills. In comparison, one organisation in the Environment portfolio is specifically recruiting those skills for use across the organisation. The Transport portfolio participants indicated that their organisations do not recruit for social, community or people based skills. Each of the four discussions leaned towards the purchase of technical skills – in order that they may deliver their programs.

5.2.4 Benefits to organisational delivery
The third theme emerging from the conversations was around the benefits the organisation could articulate as a product of undertaking community engagement. One conversation clearly stated that the organisation’s survival is dependent on robust and aligned community conversation. One participant believes that the organisation must cultivate sound relationships with both stakeholders and the broader community. Others in the Environment portfolio were less definitive but clearly believe their organisation must establish and maintain contact with the external world.

Overall, the Environment portfolio understands community engagement as a fundamental part of its business, but participants could not easily articulate how the organisation benefits from the contact. Both the Environment and Transport portfolios articulated organisational benefits in relation to project outcomes. In particular, the conversations within the Transport portfolio saw that delivering the program is the most important objective, and community engagement is a tool to facilitate that process. One discussion within Transport elucidated a more
comprehensive understanding of power and decision-sharing arrangements and clearly understood capacity building. Other than the outstanding conversation noted above, all conversations yielded very little dialogue around benefits to the organisation’s delivery, unless they are tied to a specific project.

5.2.5 Organisational reform
The fourth theme, organisational reform, emerged from eight robust discussions that were occasionally contextualised by a national reform agenda and sometimes confused about the reform agenda underway. The transport conversations were diverse, ranging from a discussion about the portfolio’s obligation to participate in government reform through achieving sound relationships with the community, to two conversations that articulated fear of having their agenda hijacked and not delivering the program. Within the Transport portfolio, there is acknowledgement that community engagement is a vital tool but concern about how that might be achieved while the organisation is judged on delivering (mostly) infrastructure projects.

5.2.6 Future government
Finally, discussions about the future of government and the role of the community did not indicate that the interviewed senior bureaucrats are well versed on the possible activity of government into the future. There was limited discussion regarding the role of community as an agent of bureaucratic change, but acknowledgement that communities are expecting more accountability and engagement from the government decision-making process. No one raised power sharing or new decision-making structures and there was no indication that
people are thinking about local governance and the role it could play in changing the way government works.

All participants had heard of the Regional Management Forums (RMFs) and recognised that they had a role to play in local decision making but again, there was limited awareness that RMFs could play a larger role in doing government business at the local level. The conversation emphasised a focus on improved service delivery which included a community engagement component of the design, rather than a community-led or driven prioritisation process.

5.3 Community engagement as the tool for building social cohesion
This project has explored community engagement and the role it plays in broader community building and participatory governance agendas. Through the application of community engagement processes, traditionally undertaken by government in response to disadvantaged communities, a range of communities have partnered with government to respond to changes in place across the state.

There is sufficient emerging evidence to indicate that the process of engagement contributes to building the strength of communities and achieving improved economic outcomes. Community engagement processes have been adopted by various government agencies as they seek to deliver their programs, particularly where communities are in the process of change.

This project has posed the notion that community building is undertaken at the local level and must contain local governance and social communication systems as the structural platform on which meaning making takes place. The
conversations with senior bureaucrats have revealed that the Transport and Environment portfolios have significant understanding of engagement and consultative mechanisms, but limited recognition that this work is contextualised within a government reform agenda and that community engagement commences the process of building social capital. Neither portfolio has a view that it responds to disadvantage, but each has clearly adopted community engagement processes to implement projects and programs. The scope of application of community engagement strategies within government has shifted from a place or population response to disadvantage, to a useful process for undertaking government business as it seeks to bring wider views to the table and build broad support for key directions. The acknowledgement that community building is not only about disadvantage is a significant step forward in government agencies’ proactively utilising engagement skills to undertake the development and delivery of government business.

Portfolio responses have revealed that senior bureaucrats tend to think within the portfolio and are themselves not engaged in changing the way government works at the broadest level. None of the conversations indicated that participants saw ahead to a shift in decision making structures within government as a response to the community building agenda, or changing governance arrangements or their role in building the capacity of communities to ensure robust leadership at the local level. Community engagement is mostly used as a tactical or pragmatic tool to undertake transactions between government departments and communities.
5.3.1 Building the logic

The next task within this project is to build a logic which explores a missing piece of the jigsaw – the social communication system which underpins community engagement strategies and ultimately contributes to the sustainability of community building outcomes. Chapter four has indicated that discourse is the consistent component that underpins community engagement strategies and that a sophisticated understanding of communication is missing from the engagement construct undertaken in parts of the Victorian Public Service. Participants in the research all expressed the view that communication is the key to successful engagement and the method by which they know that they have been successful in working with a group of people. Much of the discussion regarding communication reflected a dated understanding of public relations-type communication, which uses one way information flow to provide advice to the external world.

Most of the conversations concluded that responses by participants in their engagement strategies are a key measure of success for their organisations and are included in a yearly analysis of performance. Each of the conversations indicated that, as bureaucrats, the participants are not necessarily highly skilled in communication, and most of the conversations indicated that participants believe that public-sector employees have communication skills as a personal attribute, rather than a learned tool.

There are interdependent activities at play as communities seek to work with government, and government agencies seek to change the way in which government works. The activities are mutually occurring but, in places where
community outcomes are achieved, they become conjoined and dependent on each other for success. Joined together, the two interdependent activities become a system – the community communication system.

The first activity is essentially a process designed to achieve outcomes at the community level. Community engagement is the path that citizens jointly move down as they become engaged, participate in civic activity, consider their future, plan outcome based activity and seek investment in their local place. Community engagement is the process that contains the mechanisms for undertaking public discourse. Community engagement techniques – local governance structures, visioning exercises, local prioritisation, attracting investment into the community – provide the tools by which people learn to work together and think about their future. Community engagement is the structural element of successful community building. It provides physical arrangements, learning environments and a social context in which to undertake business.

The second activity is the process of meaning making. Making meaning in public places is the essential element for successful community engagement and is fundamental to sustainable community building outcomes. Engagement cannot successfully occur without structured and meaningful communication happening at both the interpersonal level and the community level. Meaningful communication as a systemic component of community is achieved on the semiosic plane, which means that the meaning contains elements of agreed symbolic codification and a complex social system which embeds the communication. The semiosic plane is the construct which contains the identified symbols (logos, events) and creates the connection platform, the places and ways
in which communication occurs. Communities are built by people working together and agreeing on meaning and importance. The process of making meaning by attributing weight and value to ideas, stories and visions is shared at a community level as community engagement is underway – the process provides reference points for participants.

Within the communication system, the mimetic plane holds the memory of the process and the referential meaning, so that participants can continue to engage – they do not have to continually re-negotiate meaning throughout their participation. Group norms and understandings are formed and serve their purposes throughout the interaction. Holding history in the mimetic plane also means that historical referents can be easily passed on to newcomers to the group. Symbols such as strap lines or logos hold meaning that can usually be interpreted and understood by a group wider than those who created the communication. Memorable communication symbols in Australia include the Save the whale campaign in the late 1970s, the McDonald’s logo, the *It's time* Australian Labor Party political campaign and “ave a good weekend, Mr Walker” (Aerogard advertisement). Today’s lobbyists and campaigners are highly skilled at creating memorable communication symbols that serve to bind a group together (increasing connectedness within the group) and offer an explanation to an external world.

The process of community engagement provides the context for meaning to be made, and the process of semiosis allows public discourse to have meaning. Together, community engagement and semiotics converge to form the system of community communication – the essential element in successful community
building. Community communication as a systems-based element of the community building agenda utilises a range of existing tools to build the invisible structure and brings together process, understanding, collective thinking and decision making, and creates embedded meaning.

Community building is successful when local leadership accepts the mantle of responsibility for planning for the future, attracting investment to the area and working in partnership with government on behalf of their entire community. These outcomes can only be achieved through the establishment of sustainable local governance arrangements and a clearly articulated social communication system.

5.3.2 Three components of our social marketplace
The following discussion emerges from the researchers understanding of key concepts that were highlighted in the review of literature and personal observation made from twenty years work in the Victorian Public Service. The discussion has been included as an important component of the context in which government seeks to build communities.

Community building is one of the key concepts underpinning changes to the way in which government works in Victoria. Based on an assumption that strong communities (engaged and involved) can make better decisions for themselves, changing governance arrangements provide opportunity for doing government business differently. The tri-partied social governance system includes the market, government and community to form the triangle in which changes to
government business can occur and the ongoing reform of government can occur.

The market must be viable and innovative in order to deliver cost effective services that are traditionally delivered through government agencies. In Victoria the privatisation of major public services has provided opportunity for the private sector to innovate, reduce cost and improve service. This has been achieved with varying degrees of success. As one example, consider the tram and train service-delivery systems in Victoria. Prior to the government putting the service provision into the hands of the market, Victorians were subject to frequent industrial action which severely disrupted people’s ability to access their place of employment on a regular basis or move more generally around the urban environment. As a result of frequent closures of the rail system, the performance of the road network was impaired, with a direct impact on a large percentage of the population reliant on the system for everyday activity. Those people reliant on the public transport system became housebound as they became unable to move in public places. Those with additional assets at their disposal chose an alternate transport mode to move around the environment.

In this instance, handing over services traditionally delivered through the public sector to the private sector freed up government agencies to invest resources into monitoring, to achieve ongoing improvements to the system and the opportunity to plan for a growing population. The limited industrial action is testament to the fact that the market can successfully deliver public services when the conditions are right. The point is that the private sector has a role to play and, in order to successfully contribute to a balanced social structure, the sector must exist within
an appropriate context and be able to engage in outcomes that it requires for sustainability.

The role of all three segments of the societal structure are important in this instance, as the notion of a systems approach to communication requires adherence within an existing referential system in which to operate.

The second part of the tri-partied system needed to balance our societal system is the community sector. The sector called community includes community service providers (fee-for-service operators), community-based organisations, volunteers and participation in civic activity. This element of the system looks after not-for-profit activities and most efficiently delivers services that would otherwise be undertaken by government. Current examples of this service-delivery arrangement include meals-on-wheels, surf lifesaving and in Victoria the Country Fire Authority. This service-delivery model relies on a relationship between purchaser and provider – in this instance, government is usually the purchaser and small and large not-for-profit organisations return a service to the government in a contractual arrangement. The more diffuse element within the system is government investment into the community sector in order that a broad community benefit is delivered. In the service delivery environment, government specifies the return it requires on investment in specific and measurable terms – investing into the community sector returns a broad community benefit. For example, the state government provides funding for coordinators for neighbourhood houses. The funding formula attempts to distribute the limited funds throughout the sector so that neighbourhood houses can be operational, this assumes a return on behalf of the whole community. The
application of funds and use of the subsequent hours available to each
neighbourhood house is decided locally. The return for government is a broad
community benefit which sees neighbourhood houses operational and able to
provide a service to the local community. Government may also request for
specific service to be delivered through this platform. The more intangible
component of the community network is where people undertake volunteer
activity in a non-structured or random environment. Mums and dads supporting
the Little Athletics program on Saturday morning and people putting themselves
forward as representatives on local council or joining a local capacity-building
program are examples of non-structured community networks in operation.
Community strengthening objectives are delivered on the back of this
unstructured participation in a social context that is wider than the family unit. It
is the goodwill (or social capital) which exists in the context of community.

The third component of this model is government. Government plays a role in
mediating community outcomes and in finding solutions for the future, invests
funds and expertise into society, and makes laws that provide social inclusion,
equity and fairness. Government, in particular state government, is the
component of the system to which communities look for leadership, investment
and chastisement. Additionally, government has a role in creating the right
conditions for the marketplace to exist, and government invests heavily in
supporting the community sector. So government plays a complex role of leader,
investor, law and order, and visionary in changing the way social policy is
embedded into everyday decision making.
In the context of the social policy agenda, the community communication model can only be successful if the market, the community and government all play a well articulated role in a planned and understood way. The model works only if the three components are balanced and aware of the entirety of the context in which they operate. None of the three components can exist within the other – there is no concept of market if there is no community sector, there is no concept of community if there is no government – the three are interlinked and inevitably dependent on each other for existence.

The complexity inherent in the societal structure is important in building an understanding of the community communication system as community building relies heavily on a robust and engaged government and a strong community network in order for community strengthening to be enabled. Government needs to be able to lead and engage at the community level in order to bring about social outcome in disadvantaged or changing localities, and the community needs to be vibrant in order to partner with government departments to achieve outcomes at the community level. Programs such as Community Renewal and the Community Building Initiative have invested heavily up front in building social capacity so that communities can work with government and eventually work with the market to attract investment.

The heavy investment by government in capacity building usually utilises a community engagement model to bring together new understandings and to forge a path for the future; the success of this capacity building relies heavily on long-term, sustainable communication between citizens and bureaucrats. Individuals who participate in community building often learn the language and
perspective of bureaucracy in order to move their agenda forward, and in this context bureaucrats learn to understand localism, distributed decision making and how to manage risk mitigated partnerships.

5.3.3 Community communication and the state
There is a view within the bureaucracy that the state of Victoria continues to be prosperous without experiencing the market fluctuations which impact on (for example) New South Wales, because considerable reform of the public sector has been underway for well over two decades. The reform of the mental health system, education system, local government, land-use planning as well as the structure of government and subsequent departments has all contributed to a vibrant and stable state which is regarded as liveable in an international context.

The reform continues. Public servants are the footsoldiers of this reformation, whether they know it or not. As active participants in delivering government services, they either attempt to maintain the existing order or they participate in redesigning alternative governance arrangements.

The existing context in which the public sector undertakes business includes a number of tension points; existing and new governance models; market, community and public sectors; rural and metropolitan; vertical and horizontal management arrangements. The social semiotic model considers these tensions as part of the mimetic plane – the context in which meaning making (the process of semiosis) takes place. The mimetic context includes a common understanding of existing concepts, beliefs and history and is the place in which individuals test the external world against their constructed reality.
The mimetic plane holds all the knowledge and experience to date in understanding community engagement, capacity building, social capital or community governance, as well as the day-to-day practice of government engaging with citizens. The content of the mimetic plane is visible to all social actors and is held in a collective memory.

The mimetic plane is the space in which the tangible relationship with reality exists. As well as holding history, the mimetic plane serves as the link between the process of making meaning (semiosis) and the existence of the social actors. The mimetic plane is an important component of the proposed model due to its role as a receptacle of knowledge and the active link between process and everyday lives.

The creation of the DVC (2004) was a deliberate attempt to demonstrate new ways of bureaucracy working together, across portfolio and in response to place-based need. The structure of the department saw local teams authorised to bring together around the table bureaucrats from other departments to solve a local issue or invest in a place. New programs were designed to build the narrative of place and demonstrate that leveraged investment achieved greater returns for the community as well as broader outcomes for government. Programs such as the Community Building Initiative (small towns in regional Victoria) and Community Renewal (urban disadvantage) have demonstrated a return on investment and the value of strong local governance. Transport Connections identified underutilised assets and the need for access and mobility which could be brought together at a community level to achieve greater outcomes for communities.
More recently, in the creation of the Department of the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), the government has recognised that planning, including strategic and statutory land use planning, and communities go hand in hand, as there is a collective desire to create liveable communities. The public positioning of the new department articulates the intent to push further into place and combine community development methodology with strategic planning within the context of place based investment. DPCD uses terms such as ‘putting people into planning’, ‘planning into place’, ‘communities at the heart of planning’ to build the logic of the department.

Discourse at the theoretical level regarding place as an investment logic has shifted from addressing extreme or entrenched disadvantage to a broader framework for investment by government. Using the logic of place, DPCD has designed a response to managing growth through investing via government and the private sector that offers a spatial component into which elements of capital are channelled. Places such as Ringwood and Doncaster (outer suburbs of Melbourne) have been highlighted as activity centres that require a concentrated effort to continue to respond to growth in the corridor. Investment by government and developers is supported by a long-term land-use strategy, ring-fenced into a spatial location and implemented using community building principles to engage local citizens, local government and local investors.

Underpinning the process in Ringwood has been a robust community engagement strategy which commenced with a capacity building program to discuss issues such as the Maroondah Highway, the railway station precinct and
the role of Ringwood in the corridor of activity. A whole-of-government approach was adopted to develop and implement the community engagement activity, with specific activities being led by the most appropriate agency. The result will be a cohesive plan for which there is significant adoption by citizens and investors, agreement with government and a framework to ensure long term investment into the area.

Where the government is addressing entrenched disadvantage, a similar response has been adopted. The government has invested in community capacity building in places such as Whittington and Laverton (western Melbourne) and after 3-4 years is starting to see a return as investors contribute to building community facilities and upgrade retail outlets. There is considerable hope for a new approach to government investment being tested in Corio – Norlane, an area of extreme disadvantage on the northern outskirts of Geelong. Viewed as a place of chronic despair due to crime rates above the state average, third-generation unemployment in families, educational achievement below the state average and 60% unemployment across the two suburbs, change in Corio-Norlane seems to be unachievable. Significant government funding has been invested in the area over the past 20 years with no discernable shift on the SEIFA indices used by DPCD to determine levels of disadvantage.

Rather than invest in a portfolio based approach, the government is bringing together all parts of the bureaucracy to not only look at their proposed investments in a holistic way, but to identify and address the liveability gaps. The identification of the issues in Corio – Norlane should conclude with a whole
picture of proposed investment by government, council and the private sector in order to reposition Corio Norlane as a strategic suburban area within Geelong.

This is a seemingly simple and obvious strategy to adopt by government in order to address place-based disadvantage. As mentioned earlier, the inherent difficulty in achieving holistic outcomes at the community level is the organisational structure of government bureaucracy. In order to achieve a single investment strategy for a place, the vertical and horizontal, rural and metropolitan, and political and bureaucratic need to be skilfully managed.

So it seems that the logic of place can be applied to strategies to address entrenched disadvantage and manage growth demands on housing, infrastructure and services. As a broad framework, it seems to be the catalyst for changing the way in which government works. Each of the projects outlined above has three common elements: a commitment across government to work together; a long-term investment approach; and sustainable local governance arrangements established.

For the purposes of this project, the investment in place is an important element in the logic of community capacity building, as it provides boundaries and context in which activity can be undertaken. This study is specifically concerned with the social communication components of the community building effort on which the success of place based investment rests.

The broader context in which the investment in place occurs is localism. The transfer of decision making from homogenised and centralised systems to a
location-specific and locally led leadership model underpins the importance of community conversation. The shift in government business delivery from universal systems to localised platforms assumes an engagement mechanism as fundamental to creating connection and moving forward.

The community building agenda using community engagement methodologies provides the tools for reforming the way in which government works. Changes to decision-making structures from a centralised model to a local model combined with government investment strategies and strong local leadership will enable a state which can operate in a cohesive and compassionate manner to respond to issues such as growth and entrenched disadvantage. Discussions regarding investment can be transparent, long-term aspirations shared by a broad spectrum of communities as government bureaucrats engage in the business of reforming government.

This thesis contends that making meaning in public places is a fundamental concept in achieving sound community strengthening outcomes. Using community engagement as the tool to connect with people, and social communications as the technique to embed outcomes, the community communication system provides an alternate lens through which to view the building of sustainable local governance structures.

5.4 From reduction to condensation
The thematic approach to understanding the data provides a context for a more complex data analysis, which was developed through the reduction of key concepts followed by the extrapolation of ideas through typification. The analysis
in Diagram 2 elucidated further clarification of the ideas and issues generated through the data creation process.

The sub-themes were analysed within the simple thematic structure, as well as across themes, in order to develop new concepts and ideas in regard to the topic area. The tabulation included the five themes and four sub-themes and sought to highlight the inter-relationships established within the data. The outcome of typification also allowed the researcher to identify gaps in the system of community building and communication, and propose a new way of thinking about a systemic response to government activity.

Reduction = Typification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme A</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Local commitments</td>
<td>Process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme B</td>
<td>Application</td>
<td>Organisation structure</td>
<td>Risk mitigation</td>
<td>Personal beliefs</td>
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<td>Theme C</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>Services/project implementation</td>
<td>Output/reporting</td>
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<td>Theme D</td>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>Principle</td>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>Collaborative/relationship based</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme E</td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Institutional reform</td>
<td>Local/state</td>
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Diagram 2 – Typification Table

Understanding \(^A\) of the community building agenda evidences a sub-theme of organisation design \(^{A4, E2}\) as a significant response by government institutions. The design \(^{B1}\), structure \(^{D2}\) and way in which the organisation works \(^{D3, C3}\) have an impact how the engagement with communities is responded to within the organisation. The leadership \(^{E3}\) of the organisation sets the tone for the
relationship with communities, and ultimately the business response which emerges from the organisation undertaking business.

In addition to the design of the organisation, and the subsequent arrangements from which to deliver the business, the application \( B \) and benefits \( C \) arising from the decision-making process focus heavily on managing risk \( B_2 \). Risk mitigation through community-based relationships \( D_4 \) is seen to manage the potential of project or service delivery failure \( C_1 \) and loss of public confidence \( C_4 \) in government. There was limited referral to the reformation principle inherent within a community building agenda and little mention of building social capital through the work of the organisation.

Both risk \( B_2 \) and opportunity become significant factors for organisations when considering community building and the concept of localism, especially when considering the future \( E \) of the organisational reform of government \( D \). Local and community-based issues are considered part of the architecture of community building \( A_2 \) and a major component of the future \( E_3 \), \( E_4 \) of government arrangements and service delivery.

As a framework or logic for action in response to a community building agenda, localism can operate as the driver for government and organisational reform, in both the current and future operating environments. Community building activity currently serves as a risk mitigation factor at both the project and strategy levels of organisational behaviour, specifically to progress works or mould public perception.
The process of typification and subsequent condensation of themes reveals a gap in both understanding and the theoretical framework used in the Environment and Transport portfolios. The gap is also evident in the policy agenda established through the Communities portfolio. The gap identified through the analytical process focuses on the systemic integration of communication into the community building framework. The articulation of communication in the review of the literature and the empirical data is limited to the simple concepts of consultation, information sharing and feedback.

The model of community communication brings together key concepts from community building and semiotic theory to propose a new way of understanding and integrating the negotiated social structures in which community building occurs.

### 5.5 Convergence of concepts

This project has embraced a number of separate elements, in the hope of providing a new way in which to view and understand the community strengthening agenda in Victoria. Through a review of the literature, this project posed four main elements as crucial to understanding the community building agenda – community strengthening/building; community engagement; social capital; and community communication. Through eight conversations with senior bureaucrats from the Transport and Environment portfolios, the process of meaning making was replicated and explored to highlight new knowledge that can be built through an engagement dialogue. The process of discussion and the building of collective knowledge mimicked the way in which capital is built.
through community strengthening activities, as is evident in numerous government community building programs.

The empirical data and theoretical concepts have converged to describe a different way of understanding the community building agenda, specifically the elements that need careful attention in order to build for sustainable outcomes at the community level. The model proposed below attempts to bring together the community engagement process as the steps undertaken to commence the path of community strengthening, and the logic of making meaning in public places as a fundamental component of that social structure.

The process of having the eight conversations elucidated new knowledge, confirmed ongoing discussions and collectively built a body of knowledge about community engagement in the public sector in Victoria. The process of building the knowledge can be described as semiosis. The consequence of the knowledge building and its relationship to reality can be described as mimetic. Together, the mimetic and semiosic planes form the social semiotic – the process articulated in this research project as making meaning in public places.

Within the mimetic plane, each individual (including the researcher) held historical knowledge about the way in which government works, changes within government and the role of individuals. The mimetic space also included their work their organisation is undertaking and the relationship between the social actors. The culmination of the eight interviews became part of the mimetic plane during the process of semiosis.
On the semiotic plane, meaning was made through dialogue, symbols, physical context and the actual meaning of the conversation. Through the process of semiosis, historical and new information blended to create new knowledge. To break down the symbols and signs, a detailed search for clues must be undertaken during the process of community engagement. The strength of a community is not only calculated by a series of social indicators (wealth, health etc) but by the strength of the community communication system. Measurement of the community engagement process and the social communication can provide indicators of the connectedness within the group and subsequent ability of the group to make decisions.

5.6 The community communication model
The explanation of community communication as a system is complex and multi-layered. The building of the model requires understanding of a number of key concepts and their application at a local level. The diagram below is an attempt to place all the components of community communication in a pictorial representation, in order that they may be more easily captured. The tensions inherent in the model include vertical and horizontal thinking; management and operations; regional and metropolitan understandings of community; formal and informal bureaucratic structures; and structured and unstructured participation in social life.

Diagram 3 attempts to capture both the community engagement process and the trajectory for making meaning in public places – the community communication system as described above.
The community communication system brings together the process and referential elements of community engagement and social communication as one construct in which social actors bring their collective effort to bear on a common objective for their community. The output of the activity is social cohesion which, in turn, converts to social capital and community action.

The concept proposed in Diagram 3 embeds the semiotic plane (signs, symbols and dialogue) within the mimetic plane (history and meaning) and overlays the community engagement process as the key to moving from ideas to action. The community communication system attempts to bring together the physical activity of community engagement with the more esoteric concept of communication at the level of community.
Essentially, the segments which make up the semiotic plane are visible to the social actors engaged in the process of building community strengthening. The participants engaged in semiotic activity can easily access and describe the world in which action occurs and the time and space in which collective community decision making occurs. They are able to describe the signs and text they are engaging with and they may be able to deconstruct the combination of the signs that make meaning.

An important component of the community communication construct is the process within which the activity occurs. The simple concepts of message, medium and reader, combined with element choice (called paradigmatic structures in classic semiotic theory) and codes (signified, signifier and metasigns), describe the process of semiosis. In this description, semiosis occurs within the mimetic plane (collective understanding and history) into which the community engagement process is embedded.

The community communication model essentially contends that community engagement cannot occur unless within the mimetic plane, which ultimately means it has historical referents and a sophisticated and collective meaning structure. The mimetic plane is heavily coded with agreed process and meaning derived from both history and the output of semiotic activity. In a practical sense, it would be difficult to understand in the mimetic plane if one could not understand the meaning created via the semiotic plane. Heavily coded dialogue can produce social structures which are exclusive and narrow in their approach to problem solving. The process of community engagement has inclusion as a
fundamental concept, which should mitigate the potential ‘group think’ associated with collective community thinking.

Community engagement as a key activity in which the state government heavily invests is clearly occurring in the mimetic plane. As practitioners will appreciate, the main game of community engagement at the beginning of investment is the struggle to have people understand each other and to reach a point where one conversation (however awkward) can happen. Bringing together (for example) foresters and greenies is a scene set to polarise, as opposing points of view are argued on the basis of fact, emotion and joined-up thinking. Within the mimetic plane, social actors seek to send and interpret messages, decipher fact from fiction, and build a collective discourse which can provide for broader engagement in the public sphere.

Within the proposed model of community communication, it is inconceivable to consider community engagement, community strengthening and building social capital without a sound knowledge of the communication systems at play within the specific community government wishes to engage, partner with or jointly oversee a place or project with. The semiotic plane is the space in which meaning occurs, the mimetic plane holds the link to constructed reality and community engagement embodies the process of collective action.

5.7 Final comments
It seems that the review of the literature, the data collation and the discussion regarding a community communication system together integrate an understanding of the past and current role of community building by some
organisations within the Victorian Public Service, as well as posing a direction for the future regarding a stronger focus on the development of community communication systems.

The proposed model is limited to a description of the inter-linked processes and specifically excludes the construction of the quality of outcome experienced by participants. The model provides for an extrapolation of logic which can apply to institutional reform as part of the development of public policy.

Clearly, articulating a way forward in response to the proposed community communication model is the role of the final chapter of this project.
Chapter 6
Conclusion and epilogue

6 Conclusion and epilogue

6.1 Wrap up

The importance of community conversation has explored the community strengthening agenda undertaken by the state government in Victoria, with particular attention to the process trajectory of community engagement and communication, local decision making and sustainable governance arrangements. Specifically, this thesis has examined the notion that community conversation is a systemic component of the success of community building, and that it is underdeveloped as a vital element in the architecture of community building activity by government departments. This project has proposed that community engagement and building activity initiated by agents of government could be more effective if a systems-based community communication approach is embedded in the design of community building.

The community communication system includes two major components – community engagement as the process which holds inherent achievements at the community level, and social communication as the glue that enables sustainable, community-driven governance arrangements to be established and maintained. The combination of these elements produces a systems-based approach to approaching community strengthening activities.
A broader framework which embeds communication and community strengthening has an impact on the policies and directions of an agenda to build social capital in communities. The policy framework should provide guidance on the outcomes to be sought through community strengthening and include significant attention to the sustainability of relationships. The adoption of sophisticated, negotiated communications built into the policy framework for community strengthening could see changes in the practice of community development activity by practitioners in the field, as they build relationships with communities as representatives of government agencies.

The community communication system provides an opportunity to embrace communication as a structured and vital component of the network of activity required to produce sound and sustainable outcomes at the level of community. Work on the communication element of community strengthening to date has focussed on simple notions of information flow and knowledge sharing. It seems that commentators and participants in community strengthening activities generally adopt a simplistic public relations-type approach to communications, as they are a secondary consideration and not viewed as part of the design of activity. A community communication approach attempts a more sophisticated understanding of the elements which make up human communication, and provides guidance on the implementation of engagement by bureaucracies with communities.

The model (chapter five) developed throughout this project is an attempt to consolidate numerous theories and concepts into a comprehensive whole, and provide a structure for discussion as bureaucrats move forward in their
consideration of community communication as an idea worthy of application within community strengthening activities. The model will require ongoing development, particularly as it is applied to practical activity, and ongoing refinement as concepts are better understood and able to be used with fluidity.

This chapter explores the implications of the community communication system at the state government level, with a focus on the Transport and Environment portfolios, as senior representatives of each provided significant contributions to the knowledge built throughout this project. Suggested implications for the community development portfolio have been included, as the department represents a broader approach to community strengthening across the entire public sector. The Department of Planning and Community Development plays a whole of government leadership role in community strengthening and continues to lead the social capital agenda for the state government through various programs, initiatives and coordination activities.

In addition to implications at the program level, this chapter attempts to explore the potential application of the community communication model and its use by practitioners and, finally, this chapter will explore possible next steps to advance work in the area of community communication systems.

6.2 Implication and action
The following comments regarding possible implications of this work for the Transport and Environment portfolios are made in acknowledgement that the conversations with bureaucrats were undertaken in 2005. Since that time, individual portfolio areas have further developed their approach to community
engagement, and at a whole-of-government level the community engagement network within state government has been established to pool knowledge and build a body of expertise for practitioners. The DPCD has refined and broadened its approach to community strengthening, with an increased emphasis on spatial elements included in conversations about communities, as well as a more sophisticated understanding of outcomes available at the community level. Programs being delivered through the DPCD are yielding results and the Office of the Community Sector is playing a major role in whole-of-government approaches to sector relationships.

A number of the individuals involved in the conversations about community strengthening have changed circumstances: – retirement and promotion the major reason for change. The majority are still in the state government bureaucracy, but with changed roles they may have a different understanding of the expectations of community strengthening as a community outcome. Overall, the direction of the state government bureaucracy contains the same assumptions and evidence that is collected through program evaluation which increasingly points to place based, community-driven investment models as a way of achieving improved outcomes for communities experiencing rapid change, decline and growth, or attempting to address entrenched disadvantage.

The relationship between the author and conversation participants remains the same – a bureaucratic peer relationship which continues to serve as the platform for policy and program development throughout the public sector.
6.2.1 Pragmatic implications for Transport and Environment
The overarching policy framework in Victoria has been heavily influenced in recent years by a number of global events including an increased response to terrorist activity, financial instability and climate change. The response at a state government level has been to work alongside national agendas to address such large-scale issues, but to support that response through local investment and response programs. In Victoria, there has been an increased focus on the quality of infrastructure, as policy makers consider the impact of climate change on physical amenity and the impact of terrorist activity on vital pieces of infrastructure. Economic uncertainty has seen an increased investment in capital expenditure and joined up solutions by government in order to maximise the return on investment.

This global activity is heavily influenced locally by demographic features which impact at the level of place. Factors such as the ageing population, significant population growth, higher unemployment and an increased focus on skills-based reform are influenced by global trends, but impact is most powerful at the local or community level. The corollary to both local and global influence is the desire of communities to respond locally and create stronger neighbourhoods. The backbone of the response by state government is a community strengthening agenda which aims to support communities as they respond to change. The state invests in building resilience in order that communities are able to withstand the onslaught of change and growth, as well as continue a sense of localism, connectedness and improved well-being.
The notion of a more localised response is part of the shift in focus which both the Environment and Transport portfolios must consider if community strengthening is to be a continuing objective to be achieved at the state level. The community communication system can only be developed and implemented at the level of the community and alongside a well considered engagement strategy. An approach by the state which sees local investment and local decision making as the key to robust and resilient communities will require an organisational response regarding strategy, structure, governance and evaluation.

If the next phase of work within government departments involved in community strengthening is embedding community conversation in the process of building or strengthening communities, each portfolio will require an organisation based response.

6.2.2 Communication skills – inherent or learned

The Environment portfolio expressed, more comprehensively than the Transport portfolio, the notion that communication skills within the organisation are inherent to individuals. Throughout each of the discussions, representatives from the Environment portfolio described being close to the community as an accidental feature which staff exhibit rather than a planned skill which could be part of the recruitment objective.

The assumption that a community communication as a system is based on staff with extra skills or the ability to get on with people is a fundamentally flawed assumption when considering both the model (chapter five) and its application within organisations. Community building as a way of working does not assume
inherent value within an individual; it assumes a collective building of a set of skills. At the level of policy debate regarding skill development, the Environment portfolio may wish to consider the notion that communication as a skill is able to be purchased, transferred and systemically utilised in order to achieve a required outcome.

The notion that community communication is about ‘getting on with people’ is an unsophisticated response to a body of practice that values and promotes excellence in working with groups of people, creating local governance arrangements and understands that improved outcomes can be gained through collective action. The more complex understanding of how people build meaning among themselves provides an insight into the importance of codes, symbols and implicit meaning in public places. A greater understanding of the elements of a system may assist relationship managers to strategically plan for the implementation of community communication.

6.2.3 Environment
The Environment portfolio, as evidenced by the literature and the empirical data, understands the nature of the local response and identifies opportunities for conversations with communities as part of its program design. The regional nature of the work undertaken within the portfolio provides locally respected mechanisms for ongoing conversation at the community level, but the centralised decision making is a limitation to the building of social capital which is able to be achieved through an engagement strategy. Relationships at the community level are more likely to be issue-based rather than ongoing as it is difficult to sustain local relationships from a statewide perspective. The approach at a program level
is based on a universal systems response which leaves limited opportunity for local tailored policy. Operationally, local solutions are identified and managed through a strong, distributed regional structure and an extensive stakeholder management model.

The challenge is to embed policy development or influencing strategies within the business of regions, in order that there is a regional voice at the corporate table. And, more importantly, that the regional voice is aligned with local community aspiration is a key feature which enables local environmental issues to be considered within a broader context. Understanding and articulating the local voice can be achieved through strong, community-driven governance arrangements and ensuring that community conversations are structured as part of the engagement process.

Since the data generation for this project, the structure of the Department of Sustainability and Environment changed to a platform-based model which has removed the individual regional focus in order to approach regional Victoria as a whole. It has since commenced the process of rebuilding a regional framework. As the DSE is a major component of the Environment portfolio, this change has significant implications for the approach to a community communication model. The reduced focus on regional responsiveness and local decision making has the potential to see an increase in centralised decision making and a reduced ability to facilitate community governance arrangements. Anecdotally, staff indicated limitation in their ability to respond authoritatively and lead a solution based approach to local issues. This approach seems to be in direct contrast to those of other government departments, which are actively building a regional presence –
the Department of Planning and Community Development and the Department of Justice as examples.

It seems that the next wave of change for DSE (2011) will address a number of these issues.

The challenge for the Environment portfolio in adopting a community communication systems approach is around the logistics of community engagement practice on the ground and maintaining the principles of local empowerment, as well as creating sustainable communication networks to lead and drive change at the community level. The statutory authorities within the Environment portfolio seem well placed to respond to opportunities to create a community communication strategy, as they are well regarded at the local level and work hard to achieve outcomes that are aligned with community aspirations.

At a very practical level, the question of the structure of a government organisation cannot be the decisive factor in whether a community communication system is developed and adopted as part of the relationship strategy. Organisations which centralise well established regional structures should consider the application of community communication across a statewide approach.

None of the above are issues of policy; they are issues of operations and logistics. At the conceptual level, the notion of a community communication system fits neatly with the existing activity of the Environment portfolio. The desire to align government and community aspiration is implicit in the work of the portfolio;
the notion of working locally to achieve improved outcomes at the community level has a solid evidence base within the Environment portfolio and planned, informed and ongoing intelligent conversation at the community level is an indisputable building tool.

A consistent approach to community communication throughout the portfolio may support the building of sustainable, governance-based relationships that can deliver an improved outcome regarding the environmental objectives. At both project and program levels, a community communication systems approach would increase emphasis on the sustainability of the communication system and highlight the value of community leadership.

Interestingly, some organisations within the Environment portfolio have chosen to add emphasis to the importance of community relationship through creating a centre of expertise within the organisation. The strengths and limitations of this approach could be explored through an organisational approach to developing a community communication system.

6.2.4 Transport
The empirical data and literature have revealed that the Transport portfolio has a well developed community engagement understanding which is adopted at the level of the project. Existing practice across the portfolio focuses heavily on information creation and dissemination, and local input at the final stages of program/project implementation. Input into strategic transport thinking is generally undertaken with key stakeholders and representatives from the
transport sector. The Transport portfolio seems to find it difficult to establish a sustainable connection with community at the local level.

Advisory or community consultation groups are usually established as part of the project management task. There seems to be limited consideration in the Transport portfolio of the need for ongoing relationships and the role those relationships may play in building local social capital. Instead, relationships are built for the purpose of the project and tend to disintegrate as the project or program comes to completion. The idea that projects can be a catalyst to build social capital, and can work in partnership with departments to achieve increased outcomes at the local level, is absent from the transport narrative.

In other parts of government, infrastructure projects have been utilised as the trigger to build community connections with an eye to creating a longer term local investment approach. The Transport portfolio is heavily focussed on delivering service and infrastructure as the outcome of activity with communities. Community connectedness has been used or managed to mitigate negative perception and to smooth the path of implementation. Providing a forum for the local voice removes some of the political pain associated with project implementation.

The adoption of a community communication approach would require a significant shift within the Transport portfolio in order to develop a sense of contribution to social capital building and to embed a community-based methodology to program design and implementation. The existing regional structure in some parts of the portfolio is robust and lends itself to a systemic
community communication approach, although the traditional technical skill base would need to adapt in order to embed community development and communication skills.

One obstacle to the adoption of a community communication system within Transport is the intrinsic focus on technical information and solutions, and a project response to community issues. The nature of the portfolio is imbued with transport issues and there is limited connection to a wider view of the social construct, which could stifle the ability of staff in the Transport portfolio to have a conversation beyond the transport need. Recently (2009) the move to integrate the public narrative of integrated land use and transport planning, through departmental work on Melbourne@5million and the Victorian Transport Plan, has seen closer alignment of the land-use planning and transport agendas. The implementation of activity did not specifically embed a community strengthening agenda as a way of planning the land and transport future of Victoria, but provides a platform for future reform through legislative changes and process adaptation.

In regard to the adoption of a community communication approach, the Transport portfolio would need to consider the congruence of the transport arena. In comparison to the environment narrative, transport is disjointed throughout the portfolio and heavily reliant on internal resources and contract arrangements to develop the agenda. Within the Environment portfolio, the statutory authorities have policy alignment, as they work closely with the department and the political process. Their local responsiveness is driven very tightly through centralised policy frameworks which provide some opportunity
for local interpretation. Transport has been strongly divided between a roads-based view of the world versus public transport agenda – both within government and in the external environment.

Through the development of a community communication approach, the whole Transport portfolio would need to engage to develop, adopt and embed a more holistic way of seeing the world. Perhaps a place-based overlay would help to break down the adherence to universal system design and encourage Transport professionals to engage in the process of building social capital through engaging with the community and establishing sustainable communication systems.

6.3 Community development
The views of the DPCD were not specifically canvassed throughout this project, but the literature review utilised a significant amount of material that has been generated by the DPCD to explore the community strengthening agenda. The DPCD plays a whole-of-government leadership role in the community, strengthening space through the local teams, who facilitate local outcomes, and through projects where the DPCD is charged with leading government reform to increase social outcomes. In a bureaucratic sense, the DPCD often brings little more than intellectual capital to the table in whole-of-government forums, but that contribution can integrate and leverage investment to achieve sustainable community outcomes.

The community engagement methodology utilised throughout the public sector has been built over the past 10 years, as various officers within portfolios saw the need to better connect with communities. The DPCD now takes a leadership
role in community engagement as a fundamental tool to achieve community strengthening outcomes, particularly in projects which require a whole-of-government investment approach. Through the community engagement activity, the DPCD has worked closely with local councils to embed local governance structures into the social fabric of local communities.

The community communication system would pose a slight shift in focus for the DPCD and its role in whole of government leadership. Already well skilled at the community engagement process, and understanding the benefits of community participation, the missing component for the DPCD is a sophisticated understanding of community conversation. The application of the community engagement process at a policy, program and project level does not embrace the notion of sustainability through signs, symbols, codes – making meaning in public places. The operational paradigm is one of delivering programs which ensure community acceptance and participation, not the more difficult engagement with communities in pursuit of public policy.

Embedding community conversation alongside the community engagement practice, to build the community communication system, could provide a more robust way of understanding the relationship between bureaucrats and the communities, and at a practical level could offer a more structured way of facilitating sustainable community connectedness. The benefits of a community communication systems approach by the DPCD could include increased focus on creating and building symbols of the future and bringing a stronger communication emphasis to the relationship with communities. Greater consideration of symbols to create meaning could assist in embedding sustainable
relationships at the community level. Understanding the coding system at work within a community could benefit all participants to achieve ‘cleaner’ communication and collaborative working models.

In considering the skill base of staff employed in the community development work of the DPCD, a community communication approach would see an increased emphasis on communication skills operating alongside community engagement tasks. The communication effort by the Department may become more localised and focussed on community outcomes, rather than the corporate needs of the organisation. Managing stakeholders and working in partnership with communities would jointly become the work of community development and communications professionals.

A community communication approach may have resonance with the land-use planners, as they would not be expected to find outcomes from the community engagement process. The notions of symbols, codes and meaning making, combined with community engagement as a process, could support the spatial based work undertaken by land use planners as they seek to find new ways of conceptualising communities. A combination of strategic land-use planning and communication skills utilising a community development approach would certainly yield different outcomes on the ground.

6.4 Application of the model
The Community Communication Model (Diagram 3) proposes a pictorial understanding of the community engagement and communication elements explored throughout this thesis. The model brings together two previously
separate concepts in an attempt to align and embed communication with community engagement, to achieve a single systems approach to engagement between government departments and communities.

Potential users will need to gain understanding that the mimetic plane is the overarching concept underpinning the architecture of community communication. The mimetic plane is a conceptual construct in which process is undertaken and meaning is made. The mimetic plane is the collective memory for decisions, meaning and symbols. A group of people meeting regularly to undertake community action have a well developed mimetic plane and move easily around it, together and individually. People will not need to request clarification or ask for decision making logic.

Using community engagement processes to build collective action, users of a community communication system would be aware that the facilitation effort is centred around creating a sustainable mimetic plane. In practice, this may mean ensuring that a consistent group of people attends and participates in an ongoing process; it may also mean articulating group agreements through the use of symbols or narrative. Building the mimetic plane may include developing objectives, logos, repetitive actions (ie using consistent and agreed language) and agreement by participants on directions. The facilitated process works in the semiotic plane to build the mimetic plane.

The process of semiosis is creating signs and symbols together so that collective meaning can be made. Semiotic activity resides within the mimetic. The work undertaken within the semiotic plane is ephemeral – it exists as it is created and
then becomes something else as it is built into the mimetic plane. The link between the activity in the semiotic and mimetic planes lies within human participation. Activity occurring through the process of semiotic action becomes part of the mimetic plane as humans make decisions, agree on meaning and collectively embrace tangible symbols of agreement. Building the mimetic plane can only be undertaken by collective human effort to extract meaning from the inanimate through the process of semiotics.

The model for community communication also embeds the process of engagement as a key activity to move between the semiotic and mimetic planes. The process of joining together, of using symbols, of making meaning, of sharing learning, of articulating direction and of actually taking action is driven by a community engagement process.

In this model, the community engagement practice is as equally important as using a semiotic process and as deliberately building the mimetic plane. The trajectory of engagement provides structure to move meaning making activity into the realm of tangible action. Community engagement pushes the making of meaning into a public space, where action can result as a consequence of human deliberation.

Through the model, it is intended to demonstrate that the three distinct elements are interlinked and embedded within the community communication system. Each of the three elements requires acknowledgement, but it is the totality of the system which provides a systematic building process for practitioners to utilise as they plan to work with groups of people.
The model has been developed with the relationship between government departments and communities in mind, but clearly it is able to be adapted and used for a range of interactions between parties. The complexity in the relationships is managed through all participants undergoing the same experience so, in order to deliver on the benefits of a coherent community communication system, representatives from government departments attempting to work with communities must be part of the beginning and end of the relationship lifecycle.

6.5 Critique of the research
A number of limitations regarding the scope of the research have been highlighted in the introductory comments and include sample size, scope of the research, breadth of literature and the lapsed time and consequent changes in the public and political landscape. In addition to the design-based limitations, the research includes a number of deficiencies which could be rectified with more work.

The model is a conceptual construct which assumes a considerable knowledge base for any potential user. More work to make the model clearer and additional guidance on its practical application could facilitate greater understanding. Further exploration of the communication model and its application in the development of public policy would point toward additional linkages between public and organisational activity.

The paradigmatic and theoretical architecture of the approach to research was complex but necessary both to ensure the trajectory of thought from singular to
generalised, and provide ontologically consistent analysis. This complexity meant that considerable effort by the researcher was focussed on aligning Interpretivism, Structuration and Semiotics. The desire to have the complex approach as methodological provided a robust framework within which to undertake analysis and establish links with a new way of thinking about government activity and community building.

The attempt to amalgamate a number of concepts from different theoretical contexts culminated in a complex web of ideas emerging from the literature, and consequentially many subjects were not explored in great depth throughout the narrative. The paradigmatic architecture also added complexity as a construct but was considered a useful tool for exposing the theoretical elements and constructing a framework to create alignment between theoretical constructs.

6.6 Future research
Future research in the area of community communication could focus on the benefits realised through investment in relationships between government agencies and communities. Greater understanding of the social capital building agenda and the role of government is also a future area of research, particularly in benefit realisation using social and economic indicators.

Semiotic Theory also provides an opportunity to explore more fully negotiated meaning and its implications in communities, with a particular focus on the role of social actors in building and modifying social structures through coded systems.
Social semiotics and structuration have many similar traits as theoretical frameworks, which could be further developed as a package to undertake research. Providing an integrated methodological design could be the focus of future research.

6.7 Next steps
In order to ascertain whether the community communication approach has validity for the state government and the communities it works with, the proposed model needs testing in a practical environment. Using the model as a basis for discussion with government departments is the next step in progressing community communication as a practical approach.

Dialogue is the important element which enables individuals to embark on the process of learning to understand each other, it is the process which assists people to think and plan collectively, and it is the glue which binds people to each other as they attempt to take collaborative action. Dialogue is the essence of memory on which people base existing and future communication, the history of dialogue which enables people to pass meaning on to others.

To progress this agenda further, senior representatives of government departments could consider the merits of community communication and its application within their organisation and across their portfolio. Utilising a number of pilot projects to test the application of the model would provide invaluable feedback regarding the level of increased understanding that can be achieved through the testing and learning process.
The notion of dialogue as an important structural element for government working with the community could be further explored and adopted as best practice within the organisation. Some opportunities for demonstrating dialogue as inherent could include practice-based, multi-skilled teams working across portfolios within the organisation; community-driven governance arrangements leading place-based investment; and joined-up interaction across government departments with local representatives.

6.8 Epilogue
A number of significant changes have occurred since this research commenced in 2004-05 which require acknowledgement.

This project commenced with a Steve Bracks – led Labor Government in power at the state level and a John Howard – led Liberal Government in Canberra. In Victoria, Steve Bracks gave way to John Brumby, and more recently the Liberal Party won the state election and Ted Baillieu now leads the Victorian Government. Changes in government have flow-on effects in the bureaucracy, with alterations to policy direction, changed emphasis on delivery and new personnel. The overriding agenda of community building does not change, as Victoria continues to be a state committed to social and economic inclusion and prosperity.

Each of the participants engaged in the conversations which generated data now has a different role within government. This means the dialogue regarding communities shifts within the bureaucracy but continues, as this is the way policy is generated and implemented across the public sector in Victoria.
The researcher has had three roles within the Victorian public sector throughout the preparation of this thesis. As well as being disruptive, the changes have provided the unique opportunity to delve deeply into different parts of the government and implement some of the ideas explored in this project.

The ongoing consideration that integrated communication and community development approaches could provide a new direction for the social policy agenda and the practice of government representatives working with communities is work for the future.
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www.curriculum.edu.au/ccc/connecting_with_communities

Commonwealth Government 2009

## Conversation participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title 2005</th>
<th>Update 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gary Liddle</td>
<td>Deputy Chief Executive VicRoads</td>
<td>Chief Executive VicRoads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken King</td>
<td>Executive Director Regional Services, Department of Sustainability &amp; Environment</td>
<td>Consultant/Board Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michonne van Rees</td>
<td>Deputy Director Parks Victoria</td>
<td>Regional Director (Gippsland) for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoff Shanks</td>
<td>General Manager Registration and Licensing at VicRoads</td>
<td>Director at Geoff Shanks Consulting Pty Ltd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Negus</td>
<td>Director Bus &amp; Regional Services, Department of Transport</td>
<td>General Manager Public Policy, RACV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue Jaquinot</td>
<td>Deputy Secretary, Resources and Regional Services, Department of Sustainability and Environment</td>
<td>Deputy Secretary, Community Development, Department of Planning &amp; Community Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Stone</td>
<td>Chief Executive Office of Parks Victoria</td>
<td>Chief Executive VECCI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Gidley</td>
<td>Director Major Projects VicRoads</td>
<td>Chief Operating Officer VicRoads</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guide to conversations

- Level of understanding of community building as a approach with government
- Knowledge of the state government’s community building framework
- Work undertaken by DVC to progress a community building agenda
- Application within the organisation of community building as a business strategy
- Relationship between community building and communication strategies
- Staff understanding and adoption of community building within the organisation
- The difference between community building and community development
- Social capital and what it means for government
- The role of government departments and agencies in building social capital
- Examples of the social building agenda by the organisation
- Monitoring performance and how you account for social capital as a performance indicator
- Setting budgets to facilitate community based outcomes
- Doing community building work that takes staff beyond the remit of the organisation
- How departments and agencies might use a social capital agenda as a model for reform
- The future of community building within a government context
## Theme 1 – Conceptual understanding of community strengthening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6T</td>
<td>…. is the extent to which we involve the community in the development of policy.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6T</td>
<td>I think certainly the involvement in policy development but I think it’s also relevant to the implementation of policy and in fact it could be argue that it could be associated with virtually anything that the business does. But I think primarily it’s to do with involvement in the development of policy.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6T</td>
<td>I think we have a responsibility as a government agency to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our stakeholders, very important stakeholders….. it is our customer base who in fact is the general community.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6T</td>
<td>…. is determining what we think the community actually expects of us and what the community’s needs are and it’s just sort of broad testing of what their views are. To actually involve them, engage them in the process is something I think which is quite different. … it is a mechanism to ensure that they are actually part of the policy development process.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6T</td>
<td>…. there is an expectation from the community that we should be more heavily involved in regional planning.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7T</td>
<td>My vision of community engagement is one where you really do work literally with the community in making decisions about what you are going to do in the future.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>7T</td>
<td>I see engagement as working hand in hand through issues and then finally make decisions.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>7T</td>
<td>…. ensure that you have got through all the local, or make sure that you understand all the issues of the people that are directly affected by whatever it is that you are going to do.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7T</td>
<td>… some of them might be about setting performance standards in the first place too, what is it you are looking for.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7T</td>
<td>I think we engage with our stakeholders but I don’t think that is the community. I think our engagement with the community would be in how we implement the decisions that we have already decided…</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7T</td>
<td>We presume that (big decisions) they are done through Governments being elected.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>7T</td>
<td>I would see that true engagement would have been around trying to identify the communities that were affected by whatever decision we might need. I suppose we could even go back a step further than that – is there a problem in the first place?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7T</td>
<td>…. event in terms of consultation, engagement if you like after you have decided what you are going to do, I still think that we do get significant benefits out of doing that … in terms of understanding.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8T</td>
<td>… been engaging the community right at the start to say what do you think of the current service and what do you actually want and then design around it, and then go back and say here’s our take on what you’ve told us, is that right or not.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8T</td>
<td>I suppose a lot of people see consultation as being something you do at the end because you have to. I think engagement is different in that sense. I suppose you are still consulting but I think it’s more active involvement of the community in the process.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8T</td>
<td>… the other way of looking at it is trying to work out what the forward agenda is going to be.</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>8T</td>
<td>I guess I’d have a view it’s pretty hard to engage people directly in the community when you’re trying to set the broad scale agenda because it’s such a huge issue.</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>8T</td>
<td>I’m not too sure how you engage the community in that sort of very broad scale debate.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8T</td>
<td>… expectation that at the end of the day you deliver initiatives or projects or whatever the changes which are the things that the community will relate to and actually want as the outcome.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8T</td>
<td>… if it's only short term pain relief then it’s really not going to be sustainable and if from a government’s perspective I would have thought you actually want a sustainable initiative or action that will actually meet community requirements or demands then you need to have something more than a short term issue.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>Community engagement is somewhere between community decision making and community consultation…. consultation to me is more a passive sort of approach; engagement is an active sort of listening.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>People were actually formulating the solutions to the issues and have actually been involved in describing the issues before they even got to that stage.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>We made a definite decision to actually get people to understand or articulate and understand the issues then help us develop the solutions to the issues, and that to me is community engagement.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>Decision making in that would be that you actually let the community decide what was the right outcome.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>… they’d actually formulate the issues and they formulate and decide, we’ve never done that.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>I think the reason that it’s hard is because it’s so nebulous. ….. on a project at least there’s some form around what you are trying to do, for a policy or a strategy it’s nebulous.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>…. Some of that community engagement is less of a formal process at the strategy level and more about informal process.</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>Maybe it is just an intellectual type of professional exercise</td>
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<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>You’ve got to get back to something much more concrete before people want to be engaged.</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>…. when I talk about the community…. In a generic sense but in fact we probably mean lots of little individual groups within that and how we manage those.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>… when we talk to the community often we think the simple entity but it’s not, it’s a whole range of people and what’s right for engaging a community somewhere could be wrong for another….</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>…. it’s to do with having a relationship with the community but it’s not about filtering, the outcome is about having a better relationship that leads to a project going smoothly or whatever.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>…. we’ve had the discussion but how are we going to measure it.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>But building social capital for us, I mean a big part of that could be about providing a lot more information so people can make informed judgements.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5T</td>
<td>It’s too hard!!!</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E</td>
<td>…. it’s about how you do business and therefore putting an emphasis on that.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>I’d rather see it as how you do it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>…. It's really sort of becoming a worn out term because it's not a silver bullet or a one size fits all.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>And now we’ve got to move into how do we get more and more of the programs owned by the community.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>Community engagement is just a tool I see in which you get improved outcomes…. cos you know what people value</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>…. Creating the middle ground….</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>But the middle ground is when you sit down and say ‘well ok, what is the community benefit?’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>…. the process has been to engage everyone as much as we could and I suppose we've tried to create the middle ground just because that was the only way we could bring people together, because of the lobbyists from ends of the spectrum had to get disenfranchised by the more middle ground….</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>…. cos the community is – can be so many things, whereas engagement’s got to happen. If it doesn’t happen and you don’t shift somewhere and agree to go somewhere, you haven’t really got the engagement.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>…. one of the dangers of middle ground is that it only creates group think.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>Well I say there’re two key elements to it. A – it’s time. You’ve got to allocate the time, and it’s not money. And you’ve got to be prepared to do something different. If you don’t have those two, don’t even start.</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E.</td>
<td>If you’re not prepared to do something different, if you are going to advise them, inform them, don’t even bother cos you’re going to be wasting their time.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E.</td>
<td>I think it’s probably an overused term but to me it is essentially about who we might communicate with, inform or engage with the community about what we are going to do with public assets.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E.</td>
<td>We get ourselves caught when we use the term ‘community engagement’ when we’re actually talking about telling and I think there are very few occasions where we are truly involving the community in joint decision making.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>…. so it’s more about engaging the community to find out where the hotspots might be so we can deal with the hotspots.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>…. would mean that in fact we are prepared to give some of our decision making power to the community and it’s interesting, my observation is that in fact the community doesn’t like that either.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>Generally what you’ve got is different sorts of groups that are more interested in a position and presenting their position and trying to influence somebody else to make the decision so that they don’t have to compromise their position.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>…. very few communities, true communities, are prepared to make decisions…. they’d prefer to have government make that decision. In other words, they put their position and government decides.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>A community in the sense of it’s a small village or group of people that do have to live with each other.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>I think what you’re dealing with is a community of interest and depending on the issue…. you are dealing with one community of interest and they’re the easiest because if you can get that group to agree you’re fine.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>At a very local level you’ll get a bit of compromise as well because they’ve got to live with each other.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>So it is about a dialogue, it’s about the people with expertise making that available to the community so they understand the consequence of their decision.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>I think there was starting to be a sense of a need for change and a need to engage the community because of the change of pace over the decade…. of population change, erosion of community because services, closure of some parts of government….</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>…. got the balance in there of what is engagement and what’s consultation and how do you actually deal around these sorts of issues and engage with the community rather than doing things to them because government comes in with a mandate around certain things.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>…. but it’s a long continuum…. For community building.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>We’ve got a lot in place in a community (so that) we can engage in a different way and leverage but departments are really jealous about owning community engagement.</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3E:</td>
<td>If it’s too impossible it’s disheartening and it’s destructive so you have to have something that you can actually try to make a difference with, with a bit of support and that builds community in the same way and we can observe that in anything we do….</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E:</td>
<td>…. we’re only as important as the community thinks we are. If they don’t think we are important then over time we become irrelevant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E:</td>
<td>I tend to look at Victoria broken up into a series of communities of interest, and that can be geographic or a particular interest group.</td>
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<td>4E:</td>
<td>I’m not sure that you can develop a blueprint that is universal and maintains currency, because often a community will respond to an issue for a particular reason and often in a different way to the last one.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E:</td>
<td>…. part of the success in engaging the community is reading where they might be at or where they might be wanting to get to at a particular point in time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E:</td>
<td>In a lot of what we do, I see there’s two very clear roles. One is to decide and understand, having the pie we’ve got, and how we disperse that pie…. at the moment the pie is only so big so if we want to increase something we’ve got to take something away, so you engage in the conversation. The aim is to reach agreement that we’ve got the pie carved up equitably and then it’s about getting the best result out of my or your share of the pie. …. in the longer term we can have a discussion about how big the pie can be….</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E:</td>
<td>…. there’s a whole range of interested parties who are now interested in a position sense because you’ve dealt with their unknown or concerns. There are some others who just say we don’t want to change.</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E:</td>
<td>If you want to utilise that talent and build upon it intellectually and physically, you’ve got to have that relationship and you’ve got to manage and maintain it.</td>
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## Theme 2 – Application of community engagement as an organising principle

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<tr>
<td>4E</td>
<td>I don’t know if I’ve written it down, but it’s certainly articulated in probably a combination of written and verbal. But again it’s not a 20 page document and it needs to be responsive.</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E</td>
<td>…. she’s literally walking the street listening to what people’s issues are, providing the information that they need or pointing them in the right direction, troubleshooting some of the issues and that’s partly to offset the nature of the approach of the anti group, but also to make sure that the community have got facts so they can make their own decision, but with the facts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E</td>
<td>I couldn’t put it in monetary terms but it would have to be somewhere between 10 and 20% of our resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E</td>
<td>We’re an organisation that interacts with some 70 million visitors each year, so a large proportion of the organisation – the communication is there.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>…. antagonism in that community that I think was almost physically threatening for people around that area about the management of that particular piece of…. needing to engage differently so having it as community managed and the issues of that for staff…. to reorient their thinking altogether, and what does that do as you go through that process to that community, how does it change it, build it and develop it anyway.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>…. we’re now realising it is actually essential for the delivery of the core of what we want to have delivered so what’s absent from community building across government as a strategy I think is a regional strategy or regional development strategy.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>It’s not a conscious strategy but I think it’s in the backs of minds of people because they, more often than not, live there as part of it as well…. people think about it more than we think they think about it at a reasonable level when you’re living and working in place and you’ve got the usual suspects that are part of engagement and then there’s proper community.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>I thought why didn’t we just give these girls money, save all the energy and effort and then I realised that what they had actually done was a huge piece of community engagement and ownership around a result but even more importantly people were thinking about it and working on it together and isn’t that a by-product?</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>It’s in our language.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>It rolls down to an operational level but it does happen at a corporate level too, but it’s at all the usual suspects’ end of the community.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>You’ve got the regional thing where they’re relentlessly going ahead with the way that they do things, let them come up with the examples. You’ve got some corporate sensibility into building it into the project work and the peak bodies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>I think a regional structure is terrific for the majority of it because it is mostly about place. I think the difficulty is getting the recognition of the thing as a valid thing because you can’t see…. you don’t necessarily get it…. it’s not projects, it’s not the strategy development, it’s not program development, it’s not contract management, it’s not the evaluation of the delivery continuum, so how do you actually build it…. if there’s no budget for it?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>I think it is an investment strategy and I think that people always do better with something to focus on and try to solve….</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>I think it’s worked because they’ve had to. In other words, I think they haven’t wanted bureaucrats to make the decision on their behalf, they’ve wanted to take control of it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>At a local level our staff would engage with neighbours, users, local users on a daily basis.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>At a corporate level we actually do have a partnerships branch whose responsibility is to develop up and we progressively going down the path of formal MoUs with some of the larger organisations.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>…. provides a forum for talking through and dealing with issues but also provides an umbrella…..</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>Our staff generally understand that community engagement doesn’t mean you give the community what they want…. it’s about a dialogue.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>…. It’s not a model that’s been designed in a backroom, it’s kind of like you’ve got to do it because the community’s demanding that you talk to them…. we’ll design it as we go.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>…. we’re trying to talk about assets because then your actions are a lot easier to talk about. You renovate it, you pull it down or you completely review it, or you maintain it. You care for it. Whereas the value system tends to get very emotional…</td>
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<tr>
<td>2E</td>
<td>We nearly ended up in the Supreme Court over challenges to the voting system that they were going to put in…. we’d lost the plot.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>When you get into the urban areas, they were so used to being regulated that they wanted to have a regulatory engagement.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>But once you got into the farming community they wanted to be involved and they had a sense of ownership of the land, or you were going to change them and I had a whole lot of pressures about development that you got involved in…</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>…. we said to the community here are three solutions to noise walls but we developed them, we costed them, we’ve done all of that but we said to the community we don’t care which one of these and we let them choose which one they wanted. Well, hallelujah!!!</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>So they actually made a decision but only on us having done the issues, sort of definition, what’s the solution to the problem…. was never a conversation.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>I honestly don’t think we have a mode because what we do is we have a philosophy that we want to be talking to the community and involved in the community and we want more of that rather than less of that but I don’t think we have a model as such…. everyone’s trying to move in a direction that has more involvement – whatever that means.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>I can probably only talk in theory because I don’t think we ever have truly done it.</td>
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<td>…. the intention was to actually use groups that could spread it a bit further and I don’t think that’s worked in practice but the theory was that if we involved people that had bigger networks of their own that spread out, everyone would understand. Now in practice I don’t think that’s worked, the people that have come haven’t always had those networks and therefore we won’t achieve that.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>We were getting fed up with people, when just consulting people we that inevitably there would be two or three people in every location that would come to every meeting, that would be absolutely against the project and it becomes a read hard battle to just do consultation and keep those people, you’re telling them what you want and they’re telling you that’s not what they want.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>The old way was about us telling them what we thought, them telling us what they thought and sometimes that connected but often it didn’t.</td>
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<td>It’s definitely costing us more both time and dollars.</td>
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<td>No improved outcome, if you say that the outcome is purely about what goes on the ground.</td>
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<td>8T</td>
<td>There’s no real model in the organisation. In fact it’s probably fair to say…. credibility in regional Victoria is crap…. understanding of what it’s trying to achieve is absolutely totally void and we have to fix that.</td>
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<td>8T</td>
<td>So we just basically tried to free up a bit in terms of the discussion that was occurring so at least people’s needs and views about transport could be worked on.</td>
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<td>8T</td>
<td>The model I suppose was to firstly make sure you had people with the skills in fact to be able to engage with the community.</td>
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<td>So part of the model I guess is a deliberate plan of engagement, get out there and talk to people, be known and be the go to person.</td>
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<td>….. some of which really don’t have any consultation or engagement process as far as I can see at all.</td>
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<td>I am comparing that with what I think we do, which is a lot more about community consultation or even in many instances, some of the things we talk about as community consultations are probably community communication. So it is telling people what to do.</td>
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<td>We talk about engaging with the community but once w have really decided, so we include them if you like in some of the things about how we go about the project.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>We would probably decide what they need and then try and change their expectations to match with what we think needs to be done.</td>
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<td>I don’t think we ever really go back and look at that in the first place, in terms of what are the community needs, and it may well be they want to get from A to B and they want to do it in a car. Well then we are probably coming up with the right solution. We have to assume that before we even start.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>Because there was certainly, in terms of engagement with the community, perhaps community consultation that had started well before…. but I think it has because, it is pretty broad, covering a more broad range of things that we do.</td>
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<td>There are a lot more consultations through the planning process these days than there was say ten years ago.</td>
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<td>I still think we are very much in the mode of knowing, thinking we know what’s right for the community and selling that to the community, rather than setting our policies or determining what the needs are out there.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>Whereas if it was truly about engagement, it would have been bringing a community together again to talk about what are the transport needs.</td>
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<td>If we don’t remain relevant, then there is no point us being here. So just for self-preservation and I guess that is not a justification in itself. But if we are not seen as being relevant to the community then why would we continue to be there?</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>I don’t think there is a model. I think that it is a very ad hoc arrangement. I think we tend to…. it depends on the people that happen to be in the environment.</td>
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<td>We are allowing it to happen where we have the confidence where it will go down reasonably well.</td>
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<td>We never even talk about it. We never talk about what level, or what outcome, what level of consultation, what level of openness we are prepared to have.</td>
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<td>But in a covert way I think we are much more about building a team….it is if we really need to, rather than practically and proactively.</td>
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<td>We don’t really identify the level of consultation, engagement. A lot of it is around people like me, possibly not really understanding exactly what engagement is about.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>One of the problems we have…. is that a lot of people are really threatened by it. Really, really threatened by negative feedback. Because they then that what they are doing is good for the community, can’t understand why anyone wouldn’t.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>We do measure or we do identify when we get it very wrong but we never look at it when we get it right. We never get any credit for getting it very right.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>I mean we absolutely hid from the community, we would build up a solution or some options that we might then go out there with but there would be a whole lot of work done, and then sign off the stakeholders, the main one being government. Then we would go out with an answer that we would be so locked into, that it won’t matter too much what the community says. Change it as the margins but it would be absolutely at the margins. So a true community engagement we would probably got out in the first place and find out what people actually thought about the network in that area.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>I think we involve the community reasonably well in implementing policy and putting in place projects. Where we involve and have a formal process of ensuring that we get feedback through consultative committees about the way in which projects should be delivered. I don’t think we necessarily do a good job in determining…. in engaging the community in identifying what the programs should be initially.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>I think that the advice that we provide government ought to be based on our experience in communicating and engaging the community in the process…. not only our view but it’s a community view as well because they’ve been part of the process.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>We’ve certainly put in place mechanisms to get closer to the community – the reference groups that you’ve put in place in regional services is one example of that.</td>
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# Theme 3 – Benefits of community relationship to organisational delivery

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<td>1E</td>
<td>…. but we are using members who are highly skilled to assist us.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>Now it’s all highly controlled, you should see the paperwork for one of these, all the OH &amp; S stuff.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>But honestly it’s been the best thing because we’ve actually got their members in the parks and we have had a couple of really positive letters and articles in the <em>Weekly Times</em>, a traditional critic.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>Because what you get then is a couple of things. You get your staff beginning to realise that groups aren’t horrible nasty people, actually normal people like you and I are actually nice people.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>Because our view would be that…. only exist to the extent that government’s support…. and that only exists to the extent that community support. You start losing community support and you are eventually going to threaten the entire concept…. So our view is that we need a broad community support for the….. system in order to maintain and grow it.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>It's a very clear and conscious choice on our part to get broader community support.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>Much more natural, it’s not an artificial process, it’s a much more natural process…. Because we are dealing with things that are vitally important.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>…. we're starting to capture the dollar value of the community contribution and then there’s the contribution of agreement to moving ahead so that you get a strategic outcome and the negotiation of agreement around something that’s difficult for people to swallow and move on with like giving up water for environment and managing that kind of conflict.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>…. what we are doing now has linked this community engagement work with our end to end project management work so that the communications and community engagement has to be thought about as part of the resourcing and delivery of our projects and everybody’s talking the talk.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>…. it comes down to what we’re actually delivering on the ground or the broader question of policy directions and it comes down to, apart from a very few people who have you know their hearts and souls and intellects soar above their daily concerns and where they live, most people it comes down to look this bastard next door to me is doing this…. look I invested heaps in setting up…. why won’t you change your legislation so all the work comes to me?</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>…. it can escalate up into what’s your policy decision that created that particular issue for me in my place and the impact on me and my community and my living here.</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>Ten years ago this was very much the nature of the beast and that’s changed dramatically in that ten year period.</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>I think there’s a realisation that we are only as important as the community thinks we are so our relevance, our longevity is very dependent on that.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E</td>
<td>Sometimes a very small idea or initiative can get turned into an enormous result.</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>The difference I see is value adding. We have the capacity to get to that point. In a performance sense I want to raise the high jump bar a bit higher but at the moment that’s as much resources as I can deploy. So that gap is the value-add bit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4E</td>
<td>If I can increase their experience to 95% then everyone’s a winner. And our relevance, our importance is higher in the community.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>Cos our staff are part of the community out there. So we need to demystify this whole community engagement staff. And a lot of it’s about, people who are naturally good at it and don’t need a lot of training.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>Whereas the biggest trap I think that most institutions fall into or most departments is you go and talk to – if you’re an engineer, you go and talk to a whole group of engineers.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>But there’s been some people who are really hostile towards it, sort of saying it’s extra work…. and a thousand and one excuses as to why they won’t get involved.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>Well the thing we’re finding,… is when we’ve gone out and surveyed the community, just what seems simple to us, like a term like ‘public land” has no community connection.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>So we’ve got a lot of learning about — there’s a lot of language barriers there.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>It’s in our language, community engagement, but no one’s been able to do much other than apart from the projects.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>You’ve got to go out there and talk to people about how it all – how it all might pan out, what might happen. Because it was all done as a cabinet document under relative secrecy, then it’s out there as policy pronouncement, but implementing it, you really should be spending a fair bit of the money on informing people.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>I suspect the benefits to the project would have been no different if we had done it the conventional way. The benefits hopefully are that the project is actually providing broader benefits…. give people the chance to air the broader issues.</td>
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<td>We want to give people a chance to air those broader issues and have a group discussion about them but get them to understand that we couldn't solve all of them.</td>
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<td>I guess we actually saw that people would be, in the project sense, we probably hoped it would make our job easier and in a sense more enjoyable maybe.</td>
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<td>I don’t believe that what we're doing will change the benefits one bit…. I think the process is more, and what will happen is we think we'll generate some information for both the community and council that will be of value to them in other ways, that otherwise would not have happened.</td>
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<td>So they've probably pushed us further than we really wanted to be for the project but hopefully there's a broader benefit.</td>
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<td>…. then the true benefit is really about a broader range of people.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>…. something we haven’t done well because to measure that is actually a qualitative sort of measure.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>…. if we can’t measure in hard numbers then we don’t intend to do it…. I think we’re only just starting to accept that we need some qualitative measure that we get a feel for how, and it’s a feel for how it’s going, rather than we can say this has happened. I don’t think we’ve done anything that I would describe as measuring connectedness.</td>
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<td>8T</td>
<td>…. it’s all about delivering the infrastructure. I guess we commission others to do infrastructure and we’re mostly about services.</td>
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<td>8T</td>
<td>….you’ve got much more flexibility in service delivery than you have in infrastructure delivery…. the project job in terms of community engagement and consultation was about how do we do it.</td>
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<td>8T</td>
<td>…. It’s not a specific reporting item. We’re reporting against either sort of internal costs, that is, staff overheads or projects or contracts.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>If they saw the outcome was consistent with what had been developed during the communication engagement exercise. Then one would imagine that we would end up with programs that were more focussed on community needs, probably at the local level.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>The outcome would be, we would end up with interventions that would be aligned with community expectations and community needs.</td>
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<td>Feel better about the processes and at least be, I guess, that they have some say in how things look at the end stage.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>We put a fair bit of effort into it…. To be honest with you, I wouldn’t know how to (report).</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>Absolutely, we talk about sensing and so forth. We never talk about doing it, but we never ever talk about the results probably because we never get around to doing it…. if it’s not measured, it doesn’t get done.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>Put some of those really hard things in front of the community, right out front before we even think about what we might be doing.</td>
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<td>…. there are some issues where there’s absolutely no doubt that engagement of the community is important.</td>
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<td>But if you’re looking broadly…. they tend to be very much delivery related.</td>
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<td>…. the people that are close to the community who engage the community in the process, picking that up and making sure it gets fed through to the policy makers…. but there’s another form of corporate reporting, and that is making sure that these issues are considered broadly….. we haven’t got that.</td>
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### Theme 4 – Organisational reform and community capacity building

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<td>7T</td>
<td>…. that community acceptance of projects would be measured just as we do budgets and timeframes and so on. We would probably be looking at the community benefits. The community would decide what that measure would be, and then probably decide whether we met them or not. So do the scoring, do the setting the parameters in the first place and then do the scoring.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>I think we would probably go back to where we started in the first place and that is the thing that we would imagine where the greatest scope for change would be getting people involved in those very, very early discussions.</td>
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<td>8T</td>
<td>The projects don’t get set from the point of view of engaging the community on what they want before you actually define the projects because it’s so interlined with government policy and funding.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>The risk we run now, it’s being done with this project, we’ve built up a better informed community about what are the real issues and what needs to be done but then no one grabs that for the next six months and that capital….</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>…. about building community capacity, trying to recognise that we have a role in that.</td>
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<td>I think that probably in the last few months we’ve started talking about, well we have a responsibility for building the community. I think there’s some acceptance now that that is part of our role as government policy…. I think it’s starting to happen but I don’t think there’s much practical example of that yet.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>I’d like to think that we could have a role in having communities more informed about transport type issues so they can actually be involved in the discussions.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>So I’d like to think that we had groups out there that were much more helping to do…. shaping, which means they need information.</td>
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<td>…. we always have this technical hat on and we justify not doing anything by having the technical hat on whereas true community engagement is forgetting the technical side, how’s it seen by others and then perhaps you’ve got to, if you can understand what they’re saying, do something about it….</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>…. if you’re doing a project you’re responsible for that engaging, probably consulting with the community if you’re doing development of a new policy….</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>I think it’s a philosophy that we think we should be consulting with people but there’s not a model….</td>
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<td>One is the way in which we deliver services and the other is the involvement in broader policy issues such as decisions as to whether we’re going to introduce….</td>
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<td>…. then the regional model that we’ve set up with the concept of a regional group ought to work because it ought to be a cross-section of the customer group from within the region that we are talking to regularly and if there are any service delivery deficiencies then that ought to be picked up in the process.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>…. there is a risk that any model that we put in place isn’t fully representative, that you get the zealots, the people that have single issues to push or their own personal barrows involved in the process, unless you’re very, very careful.</td>
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<td>So the real challenge is to make sure that you’ve got a group that works well, that is really representative of the views of the full community feeding into the process.</td>
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<td>It could mean that we come up with a completely different set of recommendations to the government about what the program should be…. To a certain extent it simply assumes that the kind of input that we would be getting would come up with a different result.</td>
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<td>It doesn’t matter what kind of structure you’ve got, you always will rely on people and I don’t think we have got people skilled in this area generally…. you have to have part of the organisation that’s in there close to the community, so a regional structure I think is important.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>I think there needs to be a regional structure but where it falls down is the mechanism for getting inputs from that regional structure into head office to be part of broad policy and I don’t think those feedback mechanisms are working properly.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>I don’t know what it would look like specifically but I’m pretty sure that there would be mechanisms in place for us to be much closer to the community than we are at the present time.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>Our corporate plan makes reference to them (government policies) and it indicates…. those are the pillars around which we ought to be putting our whole program together and the way in which we should be operating, but sometimes I feel we pay lip service to them a bit.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>Whereas a lot of work in our show is on about how you highlight the differences either to protect your patch, or to protect your budget…. people in the public service are not good at sharing.</td>
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<td>And the change behaviour…. is that they'll come and we'll have a discussion about how it will be managed…. and we're all prepared to give.</td>
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<td>2F</td>
<td>…. is about telling our staff too that there are different modes. Because the other thing is we have to be a regulator at times. So there has to be behaviour which supports the regulatory function which is different to community engagement function….</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>Well we're trying to get everyone to engage.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>…. in order to start building up trust, we might get around to doing all ten or we might do only two or three but we'll commit to one. So your job's to give us the ten so that we can sort of know what the scope is, rather than you just saying 'come on do something for us'.</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>Cos all the money is tied up into program outcomes…. and they see that as an add-on or a support outcome.</td>
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<td>2F</td>
<td>But it's in their language. You would say – people would probably get around to saying 'engaging the community' …. but we've got this major gap in operationalising….</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>The money should be handed out by the Secretary not the program people…. the Secretary gives the money and says ‘I want to buy community engagement outcomes’.</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>I'd see us as performance-driven which impacts on the community.</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>And that is often a problem with government or government agency, if you become too short sighted, if you're worrying about putting out the spot fires, you’ll get your arse burned at some stage.</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>Some staff, back to that 10 years ago, those staff still think I’m the only one that can do it…. I’m the only person who is (a) authorised – here’s a bit of legal paper that says it and (b) capable. But over time you get rid of that attitude.</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>I’d expect we would have solved several individual relationship issues.</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>We need to articulate better the value…. from an economic point of view.</td>
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<td>4E</td>
<td>And in 5 years I’d expect that economic value will have grown considerably because we still have a whole range of opportunities statewide.…..</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>…. about outcomes of what you want and the outcomes relate to how it will impact on our community, what’s the service, what’s the difference that we are going to make in relation to it.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>There’s a test of this is what the community wants….. were you taken by surprise or were you part of it, do you have a sense of satisfaction…. do you think we’re alert and we’re paying attention, have your concerns been met by some of this, you may not like it but do you understand it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>It’s certainly in some behavioural thing but I think that…. it should be there because quite often you’ve got to set that bar to make people pay attention to it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>…. we’ve always had our face turned…. to protect…. it should be there because quite often you’ve got to set that bar to make people pay attention to it.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>…. but we know better because we’ve got qualifications and we’re technical.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>It’s true to say it’s easier with this government’s agenda about community engagement. It has made it easier to do that…. I don’t think it’s just rhetoric, I think the community cabinet from where we’re sitting is actually a really interesting way….</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>So I think it’s more than just rhetoric it’s a government that truly wants communities to be part of…</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>Neutral or positive is another way we measure that. Obviously responses to management plans are all documented.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>I think we’re doing a hell of a lot more of it. You speak to our staff they wouldn’t have spent anywhere near the time they did 5 or 10 years ago talking to people.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>Now one of the key selection criteria’s an ability to converse and engage with people because we don’t….</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>There is absolutely no doubt we will have a number, certainly co-managed arrangements with Indigenous groups if not Indigenous groups managing….</td>
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## Theme 5 – The future of government business and communities

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<td>I think the world is changing and I think the way in which we interact with not just the community but our stakeholders and the stakeholders are probably part of the community, is evolving and changing over time as well, and no longer can governments get away with simply saying we know what's best.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>I think that there is an understanding that this government wants to be closer to the community and that’s just a broad feeling I suppose without there being necessarily formal directions or directives about that.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>…. we’ve become aware of the fact that there are expectations out there that we ought to be doing more and so we’ve actually gone out to the community and sought some responses about how well we’re travelling so it’s coming from a couple of different directions.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>At the end of the day there’s always got to be a balance based on some…. the decision has got to be statewide, it’s just got to be. Just that the inputs coming in might mean there’s a different set….. if you are just looking at a set of projects it might be a different set of projects than the set we’ve got at the moment.</td>
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<td>6T</td>
<td>Not complete power, shared power.</td>
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<td>I firmly believe that you get best value out of any relationship by simply getting to know the players at a personal level and then things just come through. The more you do to try and formalise things, the more resistance or the less you are going to maximise that opportunity.</td>
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<td>I think there will be a government imperative for us to change, so it will be an interesting time.</td>
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<td>I think it will have to be quite a different organisation.</td>
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<td>I think the key will be to simply involve the community in the decision-making process, but I’m not sure whether you’ll get to the stage of the community being involved in operational issues to that extent.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>…. but they get access which is healthy for a democracy.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>.... in a sense what you're trying to do there is change behaviour and the only way you're going to change behaviour is ultimately by engaging people in what you're trying to do so there's a natural tendency to change or indeed peer pressure forces you to change.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>.... so I think part of the role of government will be putting the framework in place and the checks and balances so that you don’t end up with a community….. how do you get the structures right to make sure a thing is well managed but provide for, I guess, reflecting the community interest and the community need.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>I think it partly needs to evolve because at the end of the day, like all things that are community driven, they’ll ultimately decide. But having said that I think that what governments have to do is pick up where the trend is going and kind of make sure…. they learn from each stage.</td>
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<td>1E</td>
<td>We need to know it but we need to be prepared to adjust depending on the circumstances so that we don’t end up with a design that’s actually not going to fulfil the needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3E</td>
<td>I think governments actually started to think that it hadn’t had an even-handed policy and the need to develop something a little warmer and close to people and listen to what people were saying around these areas because they’d been focusing on that triple bottom line stuff and outsourcing and getting rid of fat within the government sector to a huge extent.</td>
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<td>3E</td>
<td>…. we could keep building up to the point that we could keep building on it, they didn’t try to turn it on its head, that we heard them and we picked up on the things that they valued and we built that into a strategic direction and in fact the communities that are in place are participative without needing to feel destructive about it and they’re engaged.</td>
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<td>.... but I’d like to think that some of things, that the groups we call advisory groups at the moment, would be much more active in terms of informing and consulting with the people they supposedly represent and actually bringing that to our table and actually having a discussion about where we should be heading rather than, at the moment I would argue that largely those groups function as us taking things back to them and they say yah or nay, sort of thing.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>.... that they’d be bringing things back to us and helping formulate directions we’d be heading in, whereas I don’t think that happens largely at all at the moment.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>I’d like to think that communities were more informed so that they can actually take part in some of those discussions.</td>
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<td>5T</td>
<td>I’d like to think that the big change, maybe in 5 years, there’s more information flowing in influencing our directions and then us flowing information out and trying to convince people that what we’re doing is right.</td>
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<td>We’re very good at reporting outputs…. it really is an issue for government, not just for individual organisations, because outcomes are inevitably not separated by silos of government departments and I think one of the biggest encumbrances to actually reporting outcomes because…. Very few outcomes are reported, they’re usually about outputs if you’re lucky.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>But the other one in terms of access and information, you’ve got to look to the generations too where, as people get more and more hungry for information over the net, there’s going to be a lot more information leaks through that medium than probably even now.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>So you start to have the dialogue in a non-threatening time, or non-emergency event time.</td>
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<td>There’s an unwritten expectation that the government will be the perfect neighbour and it’s never going to have the capacity to do it.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>We need to invest more…. we’re very much a program specialist…. we are on about looking after particular assets on behalf of the community.</td>
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<td>2E</td>
<td>I believe our task is too big for us cos it’s on about creating middle ground so we can then demonstrate the central government. We’re dealing with people and it’s quiet. And marginalising others.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>I think there is a recognition that people have changed, people do want to be involved in decision making.</td>
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<td>…. in 10 years time no doubt will be another government who will just get sick of the same old, same old, they will change for change's sake eventually.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>Because quite frankly every person I talk to is worried about what is happening outside their front door. They couldn’t give a rat’s arse what is happening in the neighbouring municipalities. How the hell do you get together a group that is representative of the community? I know I was frustrated out of my brain trying to get together a genuine regional reference group.</td>
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<td>7T</td>
<td>All I ever get is ‘not in my backyard’. No, I get a person’s perspective or maybe in a group’s perspective from their local point of view, regionally it means very little.</td>
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<td>8T</td>
<td>Given the current situation there was a lot freer approach toward trying to find out what the community wanted and you actually had a guide who was actually hooked into getting out there and actually understanding it, to the degree where he personally and with myself went out and we briefed all the mayors and chief executives.</td>
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<td>I think in the bureaucracy because what we’ve put forward….. has come from a whole lot of engagement with the community.</td>
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