Evaluation of the 2001 Active Recreation Scheme

Community Report

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Preface

This research was commissioned by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) as part of Victoria University’s responsibilities associated with the Evaluation of the 2001 Active Recreation Scheme. The purpose of this report is to summarise the final outcomes of the evaluation research.

Projects that received funding under the 2001 Active Recreation Scheme were involved in the research, which involved the study of how recreation participation could be increased by minimising barriers and increasing supports. Stages of partnership development were defined. A contrast was also made between projects in which the partners were inter-sectoral, and those where the partners were intra-sectoral.
Contents

Preface 3

Introduction 4

Summary of Findings 8
  Status of the Projects
  Recreation Participation: Minimising Barriers and Increasing Supports
  Developing Partnerships
  Inter-sectoral and Cross-sectoral Analysis

Discussion 26

Concluding Remarks 28
**Introduction**

**Health Promotion**

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) is a lead agency in the promotion of health in Victoria. VicHealth has identified physical activity as a key priority area for health promotion and has stated that it will contribute to increasing levels of physical activity in Victoria by supporting the development of a comprehensive health promotion approach that combines environmental, community, and individual-level strategies. In addition, VicHealth has committed to actively complement the Victorian Government’s Physical Activity Framework through activities, such as supporting research and innovations in physical activity programs, that will promote greater participation in physical activity across the population and, in particular, by disadvantaged groups.

**Active Recreation Scheme**

The Active Recreation Scheme is one of the key strategies for increasing physical activity participation levels in the community. A specific VicHealth prerequisite for the projects was a partnership approach that would address the needs of a specific target group. In 2001, VicHealth supported 27 projects to a value of $593,359. Each project was formed by at least three partner agencies. The projects were located across Victoria with 12 projects based in metropolitan Melbourne and 15 projects in regional and rural Victoria.
The Evaluation

The main aim of this research project was to evaluate the 2001 Active Recreation Scheme. Data were collected in three stages. First, 11 projects were selected in order to achieve representation from different geographic locations (i.e., metropolitan, regional and rural), socio-cultural target groups (e.g., Koori, other minority groups), and other equity related demographics (i.e., age and gender). The site visits in February 2002 were conducted to gain an understanding of how the projects were progressing and to become aware of any issues with respect to the achievement of project outcomes and the operation of the partnerships. Second, a focus group with the representatives of the 27 projects was facilitated in March 2002, in conjunction with VicHealth, to explore ways in which barriers to recreation participation could be minimised and what strategies were effective at increasing recreation participation. Third, in-depth interviews were conducted in June 2002 with 19 agencies that represented both the lead agencies and partner agencies from eight of the 11 projects that were visited during the site visits. This report focuses on the findings from the research, with particular attention to results pertaining to minimising barriers and increasing support for recreation participation, and partnership development.
Summary of Findings

Status of the Projects

During the site visits it was found that the projects were achieving most of their objectives, and some projects were even exceeding their initial expectations. The main outcomes generated by the projects were: 1) the development of networks/supports; 2) the gaining of access to resources, which included funds, staff, transport, venues, and information; 3) the gaining of access to target groups to participate in the programs; and 4) the development of programs and activities that were attractive to the target groups. Although the majority of projects were successful in these four areas, some projects noted that because they were not able to access the target groups or they had not developed networks/supports that their projects were not achieving all their objectives.

Recreation Participation: Minimising Barriers and Increasing Supports

The focus group was conducted to enable the participants to explore issues relating to minimising barriers and increasing supports to recreation participation. Nine general areas were identified in the analysis of the focus group data: relationships, resources, community values/attitudes, communication, participant awareness/motivation, autonomy supportive, planning, program design, and mentors/role models. These areas are likely to be influential on one another.
**Relationships**

Relationships were identified as being a mechanism for gaining access to the target group and to an increased resource base. In particular, the partnerships were identified as being an important element for initiating and maintaining the participation of the target groups. Partners reported that the partnerships provided the access to the target groups; influenced the behaviour of the target groups in a number of positive ways; broadened the community networks and infrastructure; generated improved communication, and expanded the resource base. The partnerships were not seen as an end in themselves, but they were considered to be an important approach that assisted in achieving increased participation in sport and recreation programs.

**Resources**

The combination of financial, infrastructural, and staff resources were required for successful projects. Often the relationships provided access to these resources. Those projects that had better access to resources were more likely to be able to maintain and develop the projects to a sustainable level.

**Community values/Attitudes**

Community support to recognize and address the needs of the target groups minimized the social barriers and assisted the projects to achieve the social value they were designed to address. Recognition and commitment to what recreation programs did to address some of the needs of the target groups was a necessary step that increased recreation participation.
Communication

Communication was important on both formal and informal levels. Communication broadened the network base and support, and raised awareness of relevant issues in the wider community. Communication to the target groups regarding the projects and the outcomes they were trying to address was also important. Good communication was also needed with other key influential people, such as parents of young people, to gain their support for the programs.

Participant awareness/
Motivation

Many of the target groups were not well connected to the community networks and information systems. The use of project partners to get messages about program availability and value was important. Many of the targeted participants were reluctant to join programs without the encouragement of key contacts. Getting the target groups and key agencies talking positively about the programs assisted in raising awareness and motivating the participants.

Autonomy supportive

Programs that are ‘participant driven’ by encouraging participants to make decisions regarding program development and delivery tended to be more successful. Training of the participants to make informed decisions and to assume key responsibilities in the program delivery was an important strategy for program success. The involvement of the target groups in program planning and delivery assisted in the communication, participant awareness, and motivation dimensions.
### Planning

The projects needed to allocate sufficient resources and time to effectively plan their programs. Planning efforts, which involved the participants and partner agencies, generated more positive outcomes for the target groups.

### Program design

A sound recreation programming approach assisted to guide successful programs. Good recreation program design addressed dimensions such as participant involvement, good planning, communication, and adequate resources. Fundamental to these features was the need to have programs that were safe, accessible, and fun for the target groups.

### Mentors/Role models

For some of the target groups, positive recreation participation was not part of their normal life experience. Projects that provided exposure to positive role models through skilled leadership and the involvement of the target groups assisted in generating successful outcomes.

### Developing Partnerships

In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 agencies involved with eight projects. Factors that were explored included the benefits of the partnership, the stages of partnership development, the activities and events that had an impact on the partnership, the role of the partnership in initiating and maintaining participation, and issues regarding the importance of trust, quality, commitment, shared goals/values, communication, interdependence, and benefits/outcomes in the relationship, and how these factors were developed in the partnership.
The interviews identified several benefits of the partnerships. The most common benefit was the report from the projects’ leading partners that involvement of the leaders of the target groups, as supporting partners, was very valuable in establishing good contact with the target group. The second most common benefit was the related point that, based on the input from these partners, the lead agencies were able to more successfully identify and instigate activities that were appealing to members of the target group than the lead agencies had previously done on their own. Communication was another benefit reported by several respondents. In particular, they noted that the partnership provided the opportunity for information exchange. This exchange not only provided the knowledge of interesting activities, but it also gave the lead agencies the chance to inform members of the target group about what was available through their agencies. Several of the projects’ leaders reported that they had benefited by learning from their experience of working in partnerships.

The partnerships were identified as having gone through 10 stages of development. The order of the stages does not suggest that all partnerships went through all these stages or that they went through these stages in the order presented. Rather, these stages were found to be common to a number of partnerships and the order with which each partnership developed through these stages tended to be unique for each partnership. The 10 stages of development were:
1. **Identification of need/Intention to act** - this stage involved an individual, or individuals from different organizations, recognising that a need existed in society and committing to address that need.

2. **Choice of partners** - the stage of choosing partners was pertinent in all projects. Three kinds of partners identified from the respondents were new relationships, existing relationships, and silent partners.

3. **Initial contact** – potential partners were approached to determine their level of interest in contributing to the projects.

4. **Agreement to work together** – partners either agree formally or informally to work together on the project.

5. **Determination of project type** – deciding on the particulars of the project finally occurred with either the lead agency taking the ideas and seeking partner support or gathering the partners together and collectively working out how the project should proceed.

6. **Grant writing** – at some point the partnerships needed to organise to submit a proposal to gain support to fund their project’s development.

7. **Employment/Training** – the employment of a project officer and/or the training of volunteers to deliver the project to the target groups was a necessary step for some projects
8. **Planning** – some partners stated that planning the course of the project was an important stage in its development.

9. **Division of tasks/Establishing roles** – partners needed to determine what activities they were expected to undertake and what activities they expected others to perform.

10. **Evaluation** – some partners stated it was important to periodically review the progress of the projects.

There were four themes underlying the partnership development process. There was a need for **relationship building** where the partners form a close working alliance with each other. Establishment of **communication channels** was essential for the partners to work out how best to share information. At times there was **frustration with other organizations** that did not provide expected and necessary support. Finally, partnerships needed to **avoid circumstances that could adversely affect** the projects.

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**Activities and events that had an impact on partnership**

There were eight themes that emerged from the interviews that explain the characteristics of activities and events that had an impact on the partnership.

1. **Common commitment/goals** – it was important for project partners to focus on achieving the same outcomes in a project. Difficulties were experienced in some projects when partners had different goals or were not committed to performing their role in the project’s development.
2. **Role of participants in project** – participants had an important influence on the partnerships, because of their unfulfilled needs, and their behaviour when involved in the project. Positive influences of the participants included helping the development of cohesion among the participants, a focus on the common needs of the participants, the development of positive interactions between participants, especially when different groups joined together for a common event, and participants getting involved in the leadership of the activities and projects.

3. **Nature of activity** – successful activities and events assisted in cementing the partnerships and participant involvement. The projects that had positive experiences, such as increasing participation in recreation activities, were more likely to have the partners remain involved and to gain increased participation. Conversely, those projects that had negative experiences, such as poor attendances at events and activities, had difficulty maintaining the partnership and participant involvement.

4. **Nature and skills of staff** – the commitment, skills, dedication, networks and stability of staff in the projects assisted the partnerships to develop and consolidate. Those projects that, in particular, had high staff turnover had difficulties in developing the partnership.
5. **Transport** – some projects depended on transport to move participants to the sites of the events and activities. Difficulties in gaining access to transport inhibited the activities of some projects, which then affected the success of these projects.

6. **Networks and connections** – the ability to develop relationships with, and access, other partners, organizations that assisted the project, and participants were important in the partnership.

7. **Idea generation** – the development of strategies by partners, in conjunction with participants and supporting organizations assisted in the positive development of the partnerships.

8. **Mechanisms for operating** – projects that established procedures for effective and efficient operations had more positive partnerships. Those projects that were burdened by cumbersome procedures and policies had difficulty in developing the partnership and generating successful project outcomes.

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*Initiating and maintaining participation of the target groups*

The partnerships often played an important role in initiating and maintaining participation.

1. **Target group accessibility** – the partnerships assisted the projects in gaining access to the targeted population and encouraging their participation. The partnerships also provided the projects with a wider network of contacts, shared relevant
information, and facilitated cultural sensitivity for the target groups.

2. **Influencing behaviour of target group** – the actions of the partners had an effect on the behaviour of people in the targeted group. By having a range of partner organizations involved, the projects were able to more successfully motivate the participants, support participants’ development of leadership responsibilities, provide links to other activities and programs, and promote group/community activities.

3. **Agency relationships** – strong relationships between partner organizations contributed positively to the management of the projects.

4. **Communication** – the necessity to maintain contact between partners contributed to the project development.

5. **Expanding resource base** – the ability of partnerships to gain the necessary resources to run their projects assisted in the development of the projects.

6. **Influence of key people** – individuals generated commitment to the project through their actions, which provided important credibility to the projects for both the project partners and the targeted participants.

7. **Innovation** – partners developed new ideas for projects that could benefit the target population.
Influence of most important factors in successful projects

Previous research\(^1\) identified the seven factors of trust, quality, commitment, shared goals/values, communication, interdependence/dependence, and benefits/outcomes as being most important in how a partnership is managed. Part of the interview reviewed each of these factors to ascertain whether it was deemed important for this group of respondents, why it was important, and how each of the factors was managed. The following summary provides an explanation of each factor and why it was deemed important.

**Trust**

*Definition:* Belief that the other partner in the relationship will fulfill obligations, provide energy to the project, and have an overall positive involvement.

*Findings:* All respondents identified this factor as being important. If an agency did not trust its partners to meet obligations and contribute to the project, then the projects were unlikely to proceed. Some respondents indicated that, because their clients were “at risk,” trust was an essential element to the partnership. Interestingly, even though it was deemed to be important, some respondents tended to take it for granted and assumed it was there.

**Quality**

*Definition:* Outcome of the service will meet or exceed expectations, i.e., what the client is actually

receiving from the service and the process by which the service is delivered.

**Findings:** Most respondents indicated that quality was important but some respondents indicated they were not comfortable with this concept in the current project setting. Quality was deemed important, because if the service was not up to an appropriate standard, it would not be successful. Respondents who commented that quality was not important indicated that it was too vague and it was not a relevant concept for the participants.

**Commitment**

*Definition:* Partners are dedicated to share resources, contribute to and support the various levels of the partnership and project.

*Findings:* There was strong support for the concept of commitment. Even though there was no ranking of the seven factors interviewees identified commitment as one of the most important factors. Commitment was important because it was necessary for everyone in the partnership to do their share. If partners were not committed and did not do their share then both the partnership and project were likely to fail.

**Shared goals/values**

*Definition:* Partners share joint visions and beliefs to ensure the directions of the project.

*Findings:* Shared goals/values were seen as being important for all the groups. If the partners did not share goals and values, the partnership was unlikely to succeed.
Communication

Definition: Partners show effort and consistency in the formal documentation and discussion of information, and are aware of personal thoughts and feelings through informal communication processes.

Findings: All the respondents indicated that this was one of the most important factors. Communication was seen as being important because everybody needs to know what is happening at both a formal and informal level.

Interdependence/Dependence

Definition: Partners recognise the individual contribution and expertise that each partner can provide to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

Findings: All the respondents indicated that this factor was important. The reasons for its importance were mostly based on the approach that each of the partners had regarding the way they worked together. In particular, interdependence/dependence contributed to a synergy, where the efforts of a group of partners generated more than they could achieve without each other’s contribution.

Benefits/Outcomes

Definition: Partners achieve stated goals together by drawing on shared knowledge/expertise/resources to generate a positive result.

Findings: The respondents indicated that this factor was important in order to get results. The successful generation of project outcomes assisted in the development of commitment. If the projects were not
generating participant benefits and achieving outcomes, the partners may have viewed the partnership less favourably. It was also important for the benefits/outcomes to be generated equitably to maintain fairness in the partnership.

Development of the factors

The analysis of the interview transcripts identified eight general dimensions that guide how trust, quality, commitment, shared goals/values, communication, interdependence/dependence, and benefits/outcomes were managed in the partnerships.

1. Communication – The value and impact of good communication was recognized as a strategy that would assist the development of all the other factors. The discussion of how communication is developed identified the need for informal and formal approaches, developing personal relationships, committing to make an effort, and the staff having both the resources and skills to be good communicators, as the keys to successful communication. Simple actions like using the phone, email, meetings, discussions, and documentation were identified as concrete steps that generated good communication.

2. Resources/Staff – Aspects of agency resources and staff availability were mentioned for five of the factors. A commitment to provide resources and staff from the project partners was identified as necessary to make the partnership work. Agencies supported staff involvement in the
projects, maintained staff continuity in the projects and assigned staff with appropriate skills to the projects.

3. **Formal procedures** – The manner in which the partners interact was identified for four of the factors. Establishment of formal protocols and methods of operating influenced how the partnership evolved. Recognition of each agency’s contribution and capacities at a formal level through appropriate documentation and forums contributed to successful partnerships. It must be recognized, however, that there is also a need to include informal communication in the process, so agency staff can raise issues and concerns at an informal level.

4. **Individual attributes** – The combination of energy, reliability, and commitment created a general dimension of individual attributes. Having staff who provided energy, reliability, and commitment involved in the projects was noted for five of the factors. Many of the comments about the development of the relationships related to the skills and character that individuals bring to the projects. The people involved in the projects had these attributes to support what the projects were trying to achieve.

5. **Relationships** – The capacity to call upon and develop networks and community infrastructure was an important approach for six of the factors. The projects that had the

community networks to assist them to get their messages out and to build their projects were reported as more successful. The relationships operated at an inter-agency level as well as at a personal level.

6. **Teamwork** – The manner in which the agencies and staff worked together created a general dimension of teamwork. Teamwork was mentioned in four of the factors. The projects had a collaborative approach to working together that included informal approaches and a capacity for sharing the workload and expertise.

7. **Goals and objectives** – The partners that shared common goals and understood the projects’ objectives had developed the factors of trust, commitment, and benefits/outcomes.

8. **Outcomes** – The projects’ generation of successful outcomes supported the partnership to develop. Time was necessary for the projects to evolve at a comfortable level but program success supported the factors to be successfully developed.

In order to develop the most important factors in the partnership, it was necessary to have good communication; be well resourced, including appropriate staff; have appropriate formal procedures; have the individual attributes of energy, reliability and commitment; have good relationships (networks); be able to work as part of a team; have clear goals and objectives; and be able to focus on the outcomes of the project.
Inter-sectoral and Intra-sectoral Analysis

Part of the research investigated whether there were differences between lead and partner agencies; projects that addressed the needs of different target groups; the nature of agencies from different community settings, i.e., government and community groups; and projects based in metropolitan or country settings. The analysis of the interview transcripts identified that there were not universal differences between any of the sectors. An important element of inter-sectoral analysis was the value of agencies that provided access to target groups that could not be gained without their support.

Some respondents did identify issues about various sectors that would influence the development of the partnership.

Nature of the Agency

Government agencies such as local government and schools were identified as sometimes being difficult to get actively involved in a partnership. These agencies were viewed as being too bureaucratic and non-responsive to joining new initiatives.

Small community groups were identified as being more likely to get involved in partnerships because they had limited access to funding. Small community groups would join a partnership for a project because they would get funds that would enable them to better meet the needs of their target groups.

Metropolitan versus Country Projects

One respondent indicated that there was greater capacity to build a multi-organisation partnership in a country setting. Key people in a small community
are more likely to be associated with a range of agencies even though they are representing only one agency in a project partnership. These interconnections support the communication and access to resources that are important in the development of the projects.
Discussion

Project Outcomes

The research has found that the projects reported that they were achieving their outcomes and meeting the objectives of the Active Recreation Scheme. The projects were having a positive impact on their communities at two levels. The projects reported that they were successfully generating increased participation in sport and recreation programs for the target populations, and, through their focus on partnerships, were assisting in building broader community networks that should further meet the needs of the target groups and generally build community infrastructure.
Factors in Program and Partnership Development

One of the interesting aspects of the research outcomes was the interconnectedness of the various dimensions that influence the target groups’ participation and the partnership development. Communication, resources, staff expertise, goals and objectives, and relationships are key elements in developing both program participation and partnership development. There was a range of factors, such as program design and mentors/role models, that influence recreation program participation development. The presence of these factors had positive outcomes for recreation participation development. Conversely, the poor development of these factors (e.g., the absence of mentors/role models) will have a negative impact on recreation program development. Similarly, there is a range of factors, such as formal procedures and teamwork, that will influence how the partnership will develop.
Concluding Remarks

The research has explored the projects at a number of different levels. The combination of the site visits, the focus group, and the partnership interviews provided some unique insights about how the projects are progressing and how the overall program is being delivered. Consistently through the evaluation, the success of the programs has been identified. The projects are meeting their objectives and achieving the outcomes that VicHealth identified in the program aims. The key target groups of youth, older adults, rural and remote and economically disadvantaged Victorians are gaining access and participating in sport and recreation programs.

Much of the success of the programs is based on clear recreation program design principles, such as participative planning, clear goals and objectives, good communication, developing community partnerships, establishing/building appropriate staff expertise and gaining access to necessary resources. Projects that are putting these principles into practice were generating successful outcomes. The resources provided by VicHealth for these projects are an important catalyst for generating these results.
The study has found that there is a role for the partnerships in supporting and developing the projects. Partnerships and their development have played a key role in the expectations of VicHealth’s Active Recreation Scheme. Although many of the agencies are aware of steps they may take to manage the partnerships, there appears to be a lack of strategic focus in much of the partnership development. The outcomes of this research clearly identify some broad and specific strategic options that may guide community groups to better develop their partnerships. The value of the partnerships has been reinforced and the current research also identifies strategies for managing the key partnership elements of trust, quality, benefits/outcomes, commitment, shared goals/values, communication, and interdependence/dependence. These strategies need to be shared with community agencies to assist them in better understanding their partnerships and learning how to better manage them.