

Strengthening local communities

An overview of research examining the benefits of Neighbourhood Houses



*Department for
Victorian Communities*

Prepared by

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This report summarises findings from a research report called Broadening my Horizons by Dr Deborah Warr of the Centre for Health and Society, University of Melbourne and Jeanette Pope of the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC). The research was undertaken with funding from Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE). It was based on focus groups designed in conjunction with a cluster of Neighbourhood Houses in Whitehorse and DVC. The focus groups were facilitated by Dr Warr in 2004 and examined issues related to social capital building in Neighbourhood Houses in the City of Whitehorse.

This summary of the research on Neighbourhood Houses has been written to put it in the policy context of the Department for Victorian Communities.

Thanks to the participants and staff of the nine Neighbourhood Houses in the City of Whitehorse:

- The Avenue Neighbourhood House*
- Bennettswood Neighbourhood House
- Box Hill South Neighbourhood House
- Burwood Neighbourhood House
- Clota Cottage Neighbourhood House*
- Kerrimuir Neighbourhood House
- Koonung Cottage Community House
- Mitcham Community House*
- Vermont South Community House*

*These Houses, funded by ACFE, make up the Whitehorse Adult Learning Cluster (WALC) that initiated this research project.

Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACFE	Adult Community and Further Education
DHS	Department of Human Services
DVC	Department for Victorian Communities
NHCP	Neighbourhood House Coordination Program
WALC	Whitehorse Adult Learning Cluster

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Contents

Executive summary	1
Introduction	2
Neighbourhood Houses and the focus group participants	3
Social Capital	4
The benefits of Neighbourhood Houses	6
Making contact with the Houses and the benefits to individuals	7
Making friends	7
Respite from the negative aspects of bonding networks	7
Developing new skills	8
Transition to work and further study	8
Developing community: the broader benefits of Neighbourhood Houses	9
A sense of belonging	9
Acceptance of diversity	9
Giving back	10
Community action	10
Conclusion	13
References	14

Executive summary

In late 2004 a group of Neighbourhood Houses in the City of Whitehorse approached DVC for advice about evaluating whether their services improved social outcomes for participants. The request from the Whitehorse group highlighted the similarities between the objectives of DVC and Neighbourhood Houses, in that they both focus on the idea that the community connectedness that results from social participation can improve outcomes for individuals and communities.

Neighbourhood Houses, of which there are approximately 360 across Victoria, are local organisations that provide a broad range of community events and social, educational and recreational programs at low cost. They aim to enhance the social and economic development of communities and run on principles of inclusive participation, community empowerment, life-long learning and active citizenship.

The study that is the focus of this report shows that Neighbourhood Houses have a significant impact on the social and human capital of their participants. At their most simple they build networks that provide people with social support, personal assistance and self-confidence. They also provide a range of learning programs that build skills, most notably English language, computer and information technology, parenting and work skills. These help participants manage daily life, deal with difficult situations and transition into work, study or other activities.

Participation in Neighbourhood Houses also generates broader community benefits related to broader connections developed. 'Looser' associational networks between participants, workers and other institutions help people feel part of a community and become more tolerant of difference. More importantly, for some participants the

positive experiences in the Houses lead them to want to give back to the community and some become involved in volunteering, House committees, or decision-making activities in the broader neighbourhood. This further develops leadership and advocacy skills.

Participants' reasons for coming to the Houses largely related to their need to reduce social isolation or social disadvantage. Many made contact because they felt socially isolated as a result of being new to the area, or because their life circumstances had changed through events such as having children, the death of a spouse or retirement. Others came to try and overcome disadvantage by changing their life trajectories through skills development (to learn English, to learn to write, to develop work skills) or to find activities to give their life more enjoyment or meaning.

The importance of the Neighbourhood Houses to disadvantaged and socially isolated groups can not be understated. Although Neighbourhood Houses offer courses to all members of the community, it is significant that many of their participants are from population groups that have limited opportunities to participate in education elsewhere because of cost or entry requirements. The Houses removed barriers, including cost, to participation by these groups and in some cases this resulted in these groups having a voice in decision-making processes in their local area.

Introduction

This report summarises findings from a research project that explored the ways in which participants at nine Neighbourhood Houses in the City of Whitehorse developed social capital through their involvement in assorted programs, activities, roles and events hosted by the Neighbourhood Houses.

Social capital refers to the benefits that people experience through being connected to others in neighbourhoods, communities and society. For individuals, the benefits of social connection range across the simple pleasures of spending time with people whose company is enjoyed, getting help with everyday chores, providing contact with fresh ideas/information, learning new skills and sharing resources. More generally, social connections are good for communities and societies because they uphold positive norms and values, promote participation and involvement, encourage acceptance of diversity in multicultural societies, protect against vulnerable groups becoming socially excluded, and facilitate engagement in civic and democratic processes. Combined, these benefits of social networks constitute social capital.

The research summarised in this report was initiated when representatives from the Whitehorse Adult Learning Cluster (made up of four Neighbourhood Houses in Whitehorse) approached the Strategic Policy and Research Division of DVC for advice about evaluating its services. Dr Warr was subsequently commissioned by the Cluster to run six focus groups with a total of 53 participants involved in educative and training courses, leisure and support programs (childcare, playgroup and hobby groups), or as volunteers. The focus groups explored how participants became involved in the Houses; how they made use of them; whether involvement had opened up new opportunities for them; and what role the Houses played in the community.



Neighbourhood Houses and the focus group participants

First established in the 1970s, Neighbourhood Houses, also known as Community Houses or Learning Centres, are local organisations that provide a broad range of community events and social, educational and recreational programs at minimal cost (Humpage 2005). Delivered in welcoming and supportive environments, there are programs for children and adults, English language classes, art and craft courses, recreational and physical activity classes and opportunities for volunteering. Neighbourhood Houses share core values that reflect commitments to community development principles, inclusive participation, community empowerment, life-long learning and active citizenship (Humpage 2005). They aim to enhance the social and economic development of communities by: providing opportunities for social connection; fostering a sense of belonging; encouraging active participation in leadership roles; and sharing positive strategies for social action, advocacy, networking and self-help (Humpage 2005).

There are around 360 Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria and nine are in the City of Whitehorse. This is a relatively high socio-economic status area — ranked 9th out of 79 local government areas in Victoria — but its population includes a number of significantly socio-economically disadvantaged residents (ABS 2001). The area also has a higher proportion of elderly and non-English speaking at home residents compared to Victoria as a whole (ABS 2001).

The participants in this research do not fit the general community profile. There were significantly more women (90%), people not in paid work (58%) or in part-time work (36%) and more people who lived in households with incomes under \$25 000 per year (32%). There were fewer participants who did not speak English at home (8%).

These figures highlight an important aspect of the Neighbourhood Houses — that they make contact with groups in communities that may not access other services, or that do not have access to other opportunities, such as educational courses, because of cost or entry requirements. While Neighbourhood Houses contact a broad range of community members, it is their ability to involve the most disadvantaged and socially isolated that makes them a unique and valuable resource. As will be seen, this is particularly important given the positive outcomes that were found for participants.

Social capital

The activities of Neighbourhood Houses described above provide opportunities for participants to foster social capital.

Social capital refers to the resources and opportunities (benefits) generated through social networks. Research into social capital distinguishes between two types of networks that are pertinent in this context: close personal 'bonding' and broader associational 'bridging' networks (Figure 1) (a third type of 'linking' networks that network individuals to social institutions are not discussed in this report) (Woolcock 1998).

Bonding networks are comprised of family and friends and are largely established between people in similar life situations (Figure 1). Bonding networks can provide the benefits of emotional support, favours, practical help, contacts, resources and other forms of assistance. Positive and supportive bonding networks can provide the foundations for taking on challenges, developing new skills and exploring new roles and experiences. It is important to note it is the benefits that are drawn through networks that constitute the social capital, and not the networks themselves. Some communities have very strong bonding networks through which few benefits can be drawn. For example, some disadvantaged rural communities have strong bonding networks through which few additional resources can be generated.

Bridging networks are the 'looser' associational connections that are established between bonding networks, usually around a common interest or involvement in specific settings, such as a school, workplace, sporting club, interest group or community organisation (Figure 1). These networks can be sources of the same sorts of benefits of bonding networks except they provide individuals with a broader pool from which to draw.

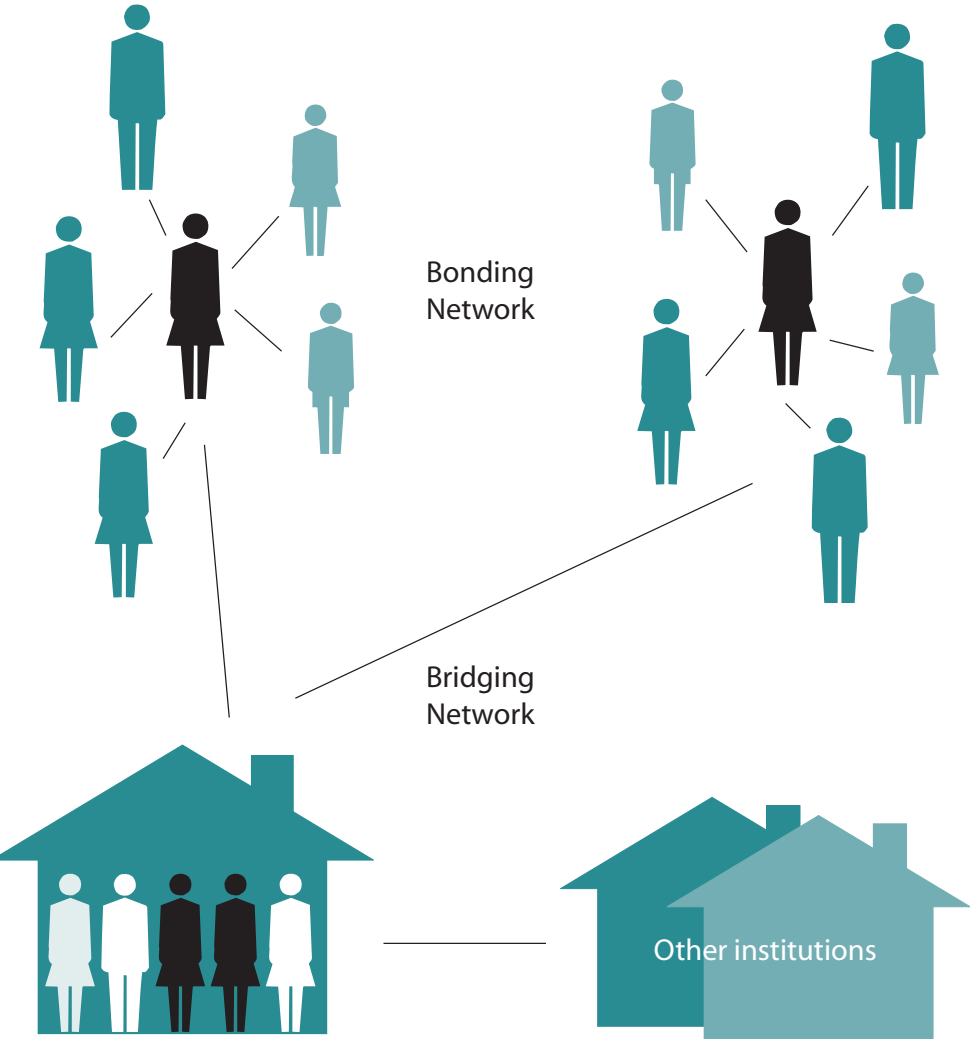
Importantly, bridging networks can have additional social benefits, such as giving people a sense of belonging to community, promoting acceptance of diversity, and promoting collective organisation and civic engagement to solve common problems. In this sense bridging networks are not only sources of benefits for individuals, but can be sources of benefits for whole communities.

Another related type of 'capital' that was not the focus of this study but that is extremely important in the context of Neighbourhood Houses is human capital. Human capital refers to the resources and opportunities generated through the knowledge, skills, qualifications, capacities, competencies and personal dispositions that people acquire through different forms of formal and informal learning (including informal contact with others). Learning equips people with the confidence to take action, the proficiency to engage with different kinds of people, and the practical knowledge or expertise needed in different fields of activity. Human capital is important in the context of the Houses because many of their programs involve learning activities.

This study did not specifically focus on the outcomes for individuals of the learning opportunities provided by the Houses and does not try to explore them in detail. They are mentioned, however, as social and human capital are intricately interrelated. Although they involve separate mechanisms for creating resources and opportunities, the benefits generated, such as access to jobs or information, can be the same. Furthermore, they both provide opportunities to develop the other. For example, enrolling in an educational course (building human capital) often results in the development of the networks of social capital. Conversely, supportive networks lead to success in learning environments.

Neighbourhood Houses have a unique set up that focuses on social as well as educational activities. They bring together a diverse range of people and offer an array of educative resources. This means they have significant potential for fostering human and social capital in their participants.

Figure 1. Bonding and bridging networks



The benefits of Neighbourhood Houses

The generation of individual and community benefits by Neighbourhood Houses are summarised in the following two sections.

The first section examines the reasons participants initially made contact with the Houses and the types of individual benefits they gained from both the networks they built and participation in learning activities. Benefits included the personal and social support that built self-confidence and self-esteem and the new skills that helped to manage everyday life, minimise disadvantage and make the transition to work or further study. These important outcomes of connection alleviated the difficulties that many of the participants were experiencing on arrival, and also provided an important foundation for further participation in community-oriented action.

The second section examines the community benefits generated by participation in the Houses. The Houses built a sense of community and the mix of people from different life circumstances promoted inclusive social attitudes and an acceptance of diversity. Positive experiences with the Houses made people want to give back to the community and for some participants this ultimately led them to become involved in neighbourhood organisations. This involvement included volunteering, membership on decision-making committees and advocacy for neighbourhood issues.



Making contact with the Houses and the benefits to individuals

The focus group discussions found that many people's stories about contact with the Neighbourhood Houses started at points of social upheaval, isolation or disadvantage. Many people initially came to Neighbourhood Houses to alleviate social isolation resulting from them being new to the area; having difficulty accessing other avenues of connection because of disability; or having had life changes such as a major illness, retirement, death of a spouse or having children. Others came to try and change their life trajectories through skills development (to learn English, to learn to write, to develop work skills) or to find activities to give their life more enjoyment or meaning.

Making friends

Neighbourhood Houses presented opportunities for people to build bonding networks (the close personal networks of family and friends) and these affirmed a sense of self-worth and provided social support. These opportunities were particularly valuable for people in situations where it is difficult to meet people, for instance, because of caring responsibilities, speaking English as a second language, limited mobility, or debilitating conditions, such as depression or illness. Many participants noted that Neighbourhood Houses provided critical social support during times of personal upheaval and stress.

Well, I retired in the 1990s ... I was petrified because I'd been recently widowed, and I was petrified about what I was going to do all day. Then a friend introduced me to the exercise class ... so I've been coming to that for nine years. And I mean it has been physically and mentally stimulating because the, um, it's a very friendly group and I've joined different things at the house from time to time and ... it has been a saving grace. We've got a

wonderful group of ladies, sort of from their fifties up to their eighties and, hopefully, we'll be going for a much longer time.

I suffered chronic post-natal depression and started to study relaxation and meditation ... the support has been fabulous because my family lives interstate ... I'd say it's given me a lot of support and security ...

I think if you've got a personal problem like mine, people don't want to know you. I think it's very, very sad, but true. I mean, a lot of people have rejected me purely because [of my disability] and here, nobody has ever rejected me.

Respite from the negative aspects of bonding networks

While many participants valued opportunities that were presented through the Neighbourhood Houses to establish new bonding networks, for others the House offered respite from the demands of existing bonding networks. This was particularly the case for mothers of young children but it was also the motivation for some of the older and retired women who were called upon to look after grandchildren.

I'm also a grandmother and ... you get that phone call, 'What are you doing on blah, blah, day?' And you can easily just be sort of available so that you get swallowed by that grandmother role. I mean, it's continuing the family role, we all love it and, you know, you wouldn't be without it. But, if you're involved in the Community House with all these other things, it does keep your adult separate identity, and a bit of your sanity all along.

Developing new skills

While some people accessed the Houses to gain social support, others were trying to develop skills (human capital). For the focus group participants the Houses were particularly important for improving English, computer skills, parenting skills and for job preparation. These skills helped participants manage everyday life, minimise disadvantage, utilise existing skills (in the case of those for whom a lack of English proficiency was a barrier) and combat social exclusion. In addition to skills development, access to resources provided by the Houses, in particular computers, allowed people to practice and become proficient in new areas.

I found that after doing that [computer] course, I now visit the local library, I use the email, Yahoo, and check out a lot of things and access to available knowledge is multiplied tremendously. ... There are a number of websites for older people, ah, there's one called 'Greypath' which is excellent — it covers every aspect: finance, health, you name it. Discussion, politics, older people's activities and problems, it's a marvellous website ... I now have confidence to go to the library for an hour and do the things I want to do.

[I was involved in] a parenting program that was very important for me. That kind of turned the corner of being a single mum ... it teaches life skills and good strategies and things ... it's very supportive. Turned the corner around and, um, now I'm working again.

Although Neighbourhood Houses offer courses to all members of the community, it is significant that many of their

participants are from population groups that have limited opportunities to participate in education elsewhere because of cost or entry requirements. The Houses therefore appear to remove an important barrier to the educational participation of people experiencing disadvantage.

Transition to work and further study

In addition to building self-confidence and life skills, the Neighbourhood Houses provided opportunities for people wanting to make the transition to work or further study. These opportunities included: skills learnt through general courses; specific courses on work transition; experience through activities like volunteering; the building of broad networks that can provide information and assistance to people making transitions. These employment-related aspects of the Houses were particularly important to parents who had been out of the workforce raising children.

I think Community Houses are really good places for transition to work. You know, I'd been out of full-time work for about 22 years and it's been very hard to get back into the workplace. But you come in here to begin, but the main thing is to start networking and finding out what it's really like out in the workforce. And that's been really important. Because when you have to jump from a family to an office or whatever you go to, to come here, it helps to get there. Starting with voluntary work, and I think that's really important.

Say you want to go to full-time work eventually. You can say 'Well, I haven't been working full-time but I've been doing this and this and I've been displaying these skills.'

Developing community: the broader benefits of Neighbourhood Houses

The previous section showed that Neighbourhood Houses provided individuals with opportunities to build networks, learn new skills, make transitions to work or further study and develop other activities for interest. The benefits that flow from these activities range from support, personal assistance and small favours to developing English language proficiency, attaining new work skills and gaining work experience.

In addition to the benefits for individuals, Neighbourhood Houses generate a number of community-oriented benefits related to the bridging networks that are built in the Houses. Bridging networks are the 'looser' associational connections that are established between bonding networks usually around a common interest or involvement in specific settings, such as a school, workplace, sporting club, interest group, or in this case, community organisation. These networks can be sources of the same sorts of benefits provided by bonding networks. However, they can have additional social benefits including giving people a sense of belonging to a community, making people more accepting of diversity and promoting forms of collective organisation to solve common problems.

A sense of belonging

Neighbourhood Houses left participants with a tangible sense of belonging to a community. This was partly due to the friendships formed, but was also related to recognising others outside the Houses in neighbourhood (familiarity generated by loose bonds). This made people feel more positive about their local area and made them feel that they belonged.

You're not a stranger ... you get to know people ... if you happen to

bump into them you've made a friend already, before bumping into them. You just walked past that person in the street before.

Just recently this Neighbourhood House had its 21st birthday and I think it was the first time I had a real sense of community here. I came along ... and there were all these people that otherwise I wouldn't have known ... I think that ... you're isolated with kids, but I think in lots of ways you can be quite isolated within your local community as full-time workers. Because you leave your home to go to your place of work, you perhaps socialise with friends from uni, school, whatever, you often don't have a real sense of, um, identity with perhaps your local neighbourhood and, for me, I think that's been developed since I've been here. Now, whether that's about having children, or whether that's the Community House, I'm not sure, but I guess, for me, the 21st birthday was really great, it was a real sense of community, like I really felt that I was actually sharing something beyond just my little playgroup, that perhaps it had been confined prior to that time.

Acceptance of diversity

Neighbourhood Houses provided occasions for participants to engage with people from different backgrounds and life circumstances, particularly those of different ethnicities, ages and abilities. This generated positive feelings towards different groups and an acceptance of diversity. For some participants, the Neighbourhood Houses provided opportunities for positive experiences that moved them to want to reciprocate and

'give back' and to see their welfare and wellbeing as linked to others. This generated community-oriented activities such as volunteering and participation on House committees.

Participants had a number of stories about social mixing. For example, a young Asian-Australian woman attended a leisure group for the elderly because she found it a good place to practise conversational English. In turn, she brought traditional home-cooked food to share with the members of the group. In another group, Anglo-Australian participants in a computer class joined their Chinese-Australian classmates on regular outings to a local yum cha restaurant. Many participants also found the intergenerational diversity important for sharing information and experience. For example, one woman noted how the young woman found the support of the older woman very reassuring in her craft class.

When you stop and have a cup of tea ... you can talk about day-to-day activities and the knowledge exchanged between people who've had different experience to you. Transmitting information and, um, social attitudes.

People are very tolerant of each other and their differences. I'm thinking of the language class, you know, the students are older, young, retired and there's some nearly deaf ones, you know, learning the language. Everybody, you know, helps each other.

Giving back

Positive experiences and increased confidence in participants elicited a desire to 'give back' to the Houses and to the community more generally.

Oh, it's done a lot for my self-worth, my self-esteem has gone up, my self-confidence. I mean, I used to be so isolated, I had a fear of people and now it's the opposite, I want to reach out to people, I want to interact and socialise and you feel so much better about yourself. That people are respecting you, like you're a human being. You have something to give and it's nice to feel appreciated and you see smiles on people's faces when you are able to help them and they feel satisfied and, it's just a wonderful, I can't say, yeah, it's just a wonderful feeling.

And I think being involved, because you get so much out of this Community House, it makes me want to give as well.

Community action

The ultimate benefit of social capital to communities is the involvement of people in decision-making and advocacy activities. Participants' experiences with the Houses in this study showed that some people develop the confidence, skills and experience to go on to advocate and become involved in organisations outside of the Houses. The skills include those needed to work in decision-making capacities such as meeting skills, negotiation skills and lobbying. This type of community engagement is particularly important for disadvantaged groups because it gives them a voice in the processes that shape the character of, and services delivered in, local areas.

The most common way in which people developed bridging networks was through volunteering or being involved on House committees. These more active and committed forms of participation often

grew out of more simple forms of participation such as attendance at courses or programs.

Gradually I just started doing some courses and then was invited to go on the Committee and I thought 'Oh, yes, I could do that' and so I've been on the Committee for about five years now.

First I came through a family violence support group and then I did some parenting and personal assertive courses. ...and then they were seeking volunteers ... and they took me on ... you get to know a lot of people, different dynamics of the area and, yeah, it's just a wonderful experience. It's opened up whole new windows of opportunity and, yep, you get out of your comfort zone and have quite different challenges.

So it started to become my own little family and it's just sort of evolved from there. So I've got more involved in the office work and being a participant. I then became [involved] on the fundraising committee and then I became a convener of the fundraising committee and somewhere in there I've done casual paid work as a staff member as well. So it just keeps blossoming and blooming and growing and it's just become a life of its own and I'd say it's given me a lot of support and security and an outlet for my skills that I've developed in the past.

I told my neighbour [about the Neighbourhood House] and she's now taking her family. ... She was suffering from post-natal depression and she goes there and she got really involved. She actually

promoted it to the local paper because there weren't enough children for that class, so she got really involved. ... She's getting involved with the committee — she's been asked to sit on the committee and she found that it boosted her confidence, especially after having the post-natal depression and being inside for such a long time. She found that really exciting. She said 'I don't know if I can go, I might, but I'll try it'. I mean, it boosted her confidence sitting on that [committee].

Involvement in community-oriented activities and decision making developed a different set of skills that ranged from simple assertiveness to organisational skills to meeting and negotiation skills.

Just dealing with the tutors' contracts and things like that, it's all just, quite new to me, and I find that really challenging and really, um, really good for me. It keeps me mentally active and ... you're dealing with all these, you know, people from the Department of Human Services, the Council and various other people and you might, you know, think 'I don't associate with them' but it puts you out there.

Participant A: Just being able to know about, you know, the running of the committee, how a meeting was run ... if you're a member of a committee going off to a meeting you learn, you do learn all about protocol and when to talk, when not to talk. Participant B: And you learn to deal with people. A lot of the committees — to, um, know what's going on and get interested, you learn how to deal with different people, you don't always agree with them but it's a

good way to see different aspects and different views of things.

Here, everyone is doing something different and I'm just dealing with a whole lot of different people from inside the House and out. I'm learning new skills. And also by being on the committee, we've had to employ staff, so advertising and going through resumes and deciding who you're going to interview and being part of the interview process and then actually choosing somebody. I actually think in some ways it's going to help me in the future once my children are older.

Some participants were also encouraged to have a voice on local matters as evidenced by this participant describing how she encouraged others to take action.

You just start off by just writing a letter to your local State Member and say that you were supporting and that you want him to support them, you want him to support any bills or any funding or whatever. All you need to do is just write to your Local Member. Or just go and speak to him in the office. It's amazing what you can get done — because that's what they're there for. ... Just push them ... all the time ... and write to the Senators ... if you're pressing a government department for anything, ring them up at the same time every day. And don't listen to what the answers are, just say, until you get your answer because the squeakiest door gets oiled [laughter].

Some participants became involved in other local organisations.

I think as my confidence has really gained, I've actually, like, joined a

CAE book group and I'm the secretary, and I'm a volunteer with another organisation. It has extended, just to other areas ... I've branched out.

When I was a young mum and I'd been teaching and had a child, had my first baby. Well, it was the baby from Hell! And the Health Centre nurse said 'Look, go down to the Community House, they've got playgroups down there'. So I went down there and initially got involved through playgroups and then became co-ordinator and co-ordinator of the community newsletter and then found myself on the building committee of the new community house and then on the building committee of the new zone library. So it used all those coordination skills that I had from teaching and [I] just transferred them over to a new environment.

Participants that got involved in community-oriented action felt it had made a difference.

And now when I walk into the Community House or the library, I sort of sometimes sort of stand back and think 'Well, if it hadn't been for us, this wouldn't be here'. And that gives you a great sense of worth and great sense of achievement.

Conclusion

The study showed that Neighbourhood Houses have had a significant impact on the social and human capital of their participants. At their most simple they built the bonding networks that provided people with social support and other forms of personal assistance. They also built human capital through the learning activities they offered. These helped participants manage daily life, deal with difficult situations and develop skills and experience to help them transition into work, study or other activities.

Participation in Neighbourhood Houses also generated broader community benefits related to the bridging networks developed. 'Looser' associational networks helped people feel part of a community and more tolerant of difference. More importantly, for some participants the positive experiences in the Houses led them to want to give back and some became involved in volunteering, House committees, or decision-making activities in the broader neighbourhood. This further developed leadership and advocacy skills.

The importance of the Neighbourhood Houses to disadvantaged and socially isolated groups can not be understated. The Houses removed barriers, including cost, to participation by these groups and participation in some cases led to this group having a voice in decision making processes in their local area. Other research has similarly noted the importance of Community Houses for assisting even profoundly disadvantaged residents to become socially connected (Hibbitt et al. 2001).

Overall, Neighbourhood Houses appear to be a unique resource that builds a community and leads to greater participation in local areas, including in the most disadvantaged groups in communities.

Neighbourhood Houses therefore appear important for building the social and human capital that ensures the social inclusion of vulnerable individuals and social groups.

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