

## Local Evaluation Report Executive Summary Broadmeadows Early Years Partnership



### What is Best Start?

**Best Start** is a Victorian State Government funded project aimed at improving access to, and coordination of early years programs. It aims to improve the health, learning and wellbeing of all children across Victoria, from birth to the early years at school (0-8 years).

**Best Start** brings together the key agencies and services that provide services for families and their children – maternal and child health nurses, preschools, child care, early intervention services, primary schools, family support services and other community agencies – supporting them to work together in partnership with each other and with families to provide integrated and coordinated services for all families and children.

**Children are one third of our population  
and all of our future.**

- Select Panel for the Promotion of Child Health, 1981



## Broadmeadows Best Start Partnership

The **Broadmeadows Best Start Partnership** was formed in 2002. It is a formal partnership of 21 agencies, including parent representation, working locally with families and children (aged 0-8 yrs), under a signed partnership agreement. The partner agencies committed to working together to strengthen and coordinate existing activities and programs for children and families. The lead agencies in partnership were Dianella Community Health Service, Hume City Council and Broadmeadows UnitingCare. These three agencies formed an Executive Group, along with Anglicare Broadmeadows Family Services. Dianella Community Health became the lead agency and funds holder for the partnership and Broadmeadows UnitingCare, the facilitating partner, employed the Community Facilitator. This Executive Group facilitated the establishment of the partnership.

Unlike other **Best Start** partnerships where local government has lead the partnership, a not-for-profit agency undertook the role of lead agency in Broadmeadows.

The **Best Start** project is based on research evidence which shows that the early childhood years are critical to later development. Research evidence indicates that brain development begins well before birth and that, during the prenatal period, the brain needs protection from factors which may be detrimental to its development. The early years of life, particularly the first three years, form the basis for health, wellbeing and coping skills of children that affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life.

There is also clear evidence that shows that better outcomes for children and families, particularly vulnerable children, are achieved when agencies and services work together, providing a seamless service system, using the skills of all providers and helping families to access services that support holistic development – physical, mental, social, cultural and spiritual. An integrated service system means that families can get the support that they need when they need it. Children can be nurtured and supported, with opportunities to participate in play activities that help their development and social skills and access to health services, which can monitor their healthy development.

Partnerships between agencies are critical to achieving an integrated service system. This is what the Broadmeadows **Best Start** set out to achieve. The stated mission of the partnership is:

**"Optimising the health, development, learning and well-being of children living or participating in the Broadmeadows Community".**

The objectives of the partnership are:

- To improve access to universal services for vulnerable groups, especially culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities;
- To support universal services to identify and support vulnerable children and their families;
- To strengthen and improve seamless pathways from universal services to appropriate secondary or tertiary services; and
- To provide opportunities and support for the development of neighbourhood cohesion and connectedness in order to achieve more child and family friendly communities.

The **Best Start** Broadmeadows Action Plan, September 2003, was developed following community consultation and local data collection profiling children and families in each of the targeted neighbourhoods. This Plan was reviewed in August 2004 and the 2004-2005 Plan launched in November 2004.

The Partnership developed four working groups, centred on the Partnership priorities. These were:

- Early Engagement Working Group, coordinated by Anglicare, with membership including the Neighbourhood House Network, DHS Specialist Children's Services, Dianella Community Health, the Neighbourhood Renewal Project and Hume City Council Maternal and Child Health Service;
- Reading, Literacy and Numeracy Working Group, coordinated by Meadow Fair North and Upfield Primary schools, with membership including the Broad Insight Group, Orana Family Services, Hume City Council Preschool Services and the Hume Global Learning Centre;
- Community Connections Working Group, coordinated by Dianella Community Health Service, with membership including VICSEG, Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Homeground and the Migrant Resource Centre; and
- Aboriginal **Best Start** Partnership, coordinated by ATSI workers, employed by Dianella Community Health and the Northern Hospital, with membership including Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), Broadmeadows UnitingCare and local parents.

Partner agencies nominated to be involved in specific projects and with specific emphasis on particular priorities as part of their work with children and families.

### Prepared by: NLT Consulting Pty Ltd

#### Acknowledgements

The local evaluators would like to thank the agencies which have committed their time and resources to this evaluation. We hope that this report tells the story of their work in improving the outcomes for families and children in Broadmeadows and contributes to their ongoing work in engaging with families and children in their community.

### Local Evaluation Reference Group

Phil Conrick: Broadmeadows UnitingCare  
Denise Shearer: Hume City Council  
Debra O'Connor: Dianella Community Health Service  
Kaz Mc Mahon: DHS **Best Start** Project worker  
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## What is the local Evaluation?

The local evaluation has operated as a reflective tool to improve systems and service planning beyond the life of the project. Essentially, the Local Evaluation focussed on five simple questions:

1. How did the service system operate before the introduction of **Best Start**?
2. What has been achieved across the service system as a consequence of the **Best Start** partnership?
3. What have been the most effective strategies in achieving positive changes in the early years service system in the **Best Start** target areas and can these be extended to other areas within the City of Hume or elsewhere?
4. What have been the barriers to achieving positive changes?
5. What does the service system need to focus on in the future to improve the health and wellbeing of young children in the catchment area of **Best Start**?

The impact of **Best Start** can be viewed from a number of different perspectives. The partnership indicated that it wanted to examine the impact of its work from a service system perspective as well as a service delivery perspective. While it is often difficult to separate these as distinct levels, it is possible to look at the functioning of the service system prior to and after **Best Start** and the impact of these changes on how services are delivered on a day-to-day basis.

The service system refers to the network of services for children aged 0–8 years, the “Early Years Service System”. This incorporates all services which are targeted at families with young children, with a particular emphasis on the universal service system and secondary services. These include:

- Pre-natal services, particularly those within Northern Hospital;
- Maternal and Child Health (M&CH) services;
- Playgroups;
- Preschool and child care;
- Primary School; and
- Family support services, such as parenting education and support, family counselling, early intervention and in-home support services
- Other community agencies, e.g. Neighbourhood Renewal, VICSEG, Homeground, Migrant Resource Centre-North West.

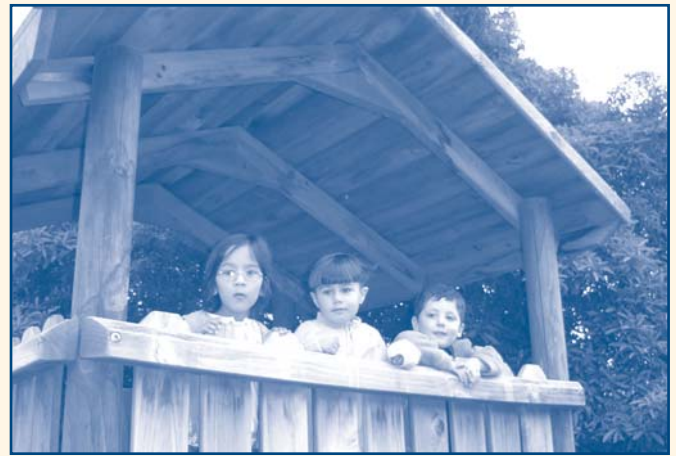
The evaluation sub-committee determined that three specific projects would be targeted. These were:

- Playgroup Coordination;
- Coordination of ATSI Programs;
- Transition to School Project: coordinating preschool, child care and primary schools.

## The Best Start Catchment Area

The Partnership works specifically in the targeted neighbourhoods of Broadmeadows, Dallas, Jacana, (Postcode 3047), Campbellfield (Postcode 3061), Coolaroo, Meadow Heights (Postcode 3048) and Westmeadows (Postcode 3049).

The catchment area is characterised by high numbers of children, lower than the Melbourne average household income and a higher rate of single parent families than the municipality as a whole. The area is culturally diverse, with the main cultural groups being Turkish, Arabic speaking and Vietnamese. Many of the residents of the area indicated that they did not speak English well.



Improvement in participation of children in preschools.

## How did the service system operate before the introduction of Best Start?

Agencies indicated that prior to the establishment of **Best Start**, they rarely spoke to each other and that there were few connections across services, particularly between kindergartens and primary schools.

**Best Start** prompted the development of connections across the service system – between primary, secondary and tertiary service providers.

**“Before Best Start, there were no connections between agencies”  
- a primary school perspective**

**“People didn’t talk to me”  
- a preschool perspective**

**“Other services didn’t understand what we did.”  
- a community agency perspective**



## What has been achieved across the service system as a consequence of the Best Start Partnership?

Service providers indicated that a number of changes have occurred in the way they work. These included:

- Increased communication between service providers;
- Increased cooperation between agencies and professionals;
- Increased sharing of resources;
- Increased knowledge and understanding of individual services;
- Increased respect for other professionals;
- Opportunities for collaboration in service delivery;
- Collaboration leading to refocusing of existing resources to improve service access; and
- Increased number of programs offered for children and families.

Teachers reported an increase in prep children who have participated in a preschool program and increased “school readiness”. This would indicate improvements in the quality of the program as well as increased participation.

Importantly, **Best Start** has facilitated increased partnering between primary schools and other early years services and community agencies, with an increase in referrals to support services and initial steps towards the development of integrated service delivery on a school site. The Broadmeadows Schools Redevelopment project has plans for five new school sites, based on a community hub model, to be implemented over the next five years. Primary schools are keen to support the co-location of preschools and space for playgroups on these sites, to facilitate the engagement of parents in their children’s learning prior to and after school entry.

This local evaluation has shown that the Broadmeadows **Best Start** Partnership has been successful in improving the early years’ service system within the catchment area. The partnership is now well established and many of the implemented innovations will be sustainable over time. This includes changes which have occurred within individual agencies as well as systemic changes. Specific service changes include:

- Increased capacity to meet needs of families through collaboration and sharing of resources;
- There are now more agencies working with families in partnerships with Hume City Council M&CH Service and a consequent increased profile for M&CH through community hub sites and facilitated playgroups;
- Increased numbers of families attending play groups, with playgroups also being set up at primary school sites; and
- Preschool and primary school staff are now attending joint professional development sessions, focussing on the early years.

“There has been a reduction of conflicting messages.”

“There has been an energising of the services.”

“Incidental networking of agencies has resulted in increased sharing of resources and even greater collaboration, for example, use of one agency’s space by another.”

“Dialogue across the table has helped to build relationships and understanding between services. Very little funding has been put into services but much has been achieved.”

“There is a high level of good will to make connections.”

“Best Start has opened doors.”

“There is a stronger commitment to be open and transparent and deal with issues as they arise.”

“There are spin-offs because people are now talking to each other.”



## What have been the most effective strategies in achieving positive changes in the early years service system in the Best Start target areas?

Many changes have been a direct result of leadership shown by school principals and Hume City Council. Several service providers indicated that the focus of the Partnership and the imperative to achieve results quickly – “to get runs on the board” – was a strong, initial incentive for agencies to take risks in their relationships with other agencies. The development of trust and improved working relationships have developed over time, and have been strengthened through joint projects.

Examples cited by stakeholders included:

1. Due to the co-location and cross-organisational sponsorship of playgroups with multi-cultural organisations, universal service providers – schools, preschools and maternal and child health services – have developed greater awareness of how to relate to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and reduce the barriers which these families face in accessing services.
2. A more holistic approach to working with families is emerging. This includes an awareness of service providers to ask families about whether immunisations are up-to-date or whether the family has attended the maternal and child health service for a development check, or enrolled their child for preschool.
3. There is a reported increase in referrals of families from the universal services to family support and other community agencies.
4. There are stronger connections between The Age Library, schools and preschools.
5. Attendance at story time at The Age Library, Global Learning Centre (GLC), has increased significantly, a consequence of the increased awareness of the importance of early literacy development and by other providers' knowledge of the availability of the service.
6. The connections between ATSI workers and other service providers has resulted in increased engagement of ATSI families in services and the development of specific ATSI focussed programs within agencies. One example of this is the employment of an ATSI community health nurse within Dianella and a community development worker at Broadmeadows UnitingCare.
9. A cyclone fence existed between the preschool and the school, which placed a physical barrier between the services, reinforcing the psychological barriers between the services. Council has now put a gate in the fence. Other sites are now sharing venues and facilities, e.g. locks for joint usage at hub sites.

The quantitative data are not definitive in relation to improvements on the key measures for **Best Start** – it is early days. However, some positive indications of changes are emerging. Some examples include:

There was an increase in the proportion of children commencing school who attended a preschool/child care program in the previous year – 2.7% increase (42 children) in 2004-05;

There was an increase in preschool participation in 2005, with one new three-year-old and a new four-year-old group being offered;

In 2006, three new four-year-old groups have been offered; and

One school reported that 90% of the children who enrolled for prep in 2006 had attended a preschool program in the previous year. This compares to a preschool program participation level of just 53% for prep enrolments in 2004.

## Can these changes be extended to other areas within Hume City or elsewhere?

Projects that have been trialled using **Best Start** as platform have been introduced across the rest of the municipality. These include:

- The importance of playgroups has been consistently mentioned by agencies and schools. Partner agencies considered that facilitated playgroups have been an important way to engage with families, particularly those who are the most isolated, such as refugees, parents who do not speak English well and ATSI families. Agencies indicated that the development of the playgroups has also resulted in increased dialogue between agencies and “spin-offs” in other service development and collaboration – they have been a powerful tool in engaging with parents, improving the coordination between services and increasing the engagement of children in early literacy activities. Ongoing funding for playgroup facilitation has now been provided by the Department of Human Services, which will support Hume City Council to continue this program and expand it to the emerging communities in the new growth areas;
- The Transition to School program is viewed as particularly constructive and is now embedded into professional practice. This is likely to result in measurable changes in preschool participation, parents' involvement in, and communication with, teachers. This project developed a portfolio of children's work in preschool which is given to parents for them to share with the primary school prep teacher. This provides an important insight into each child's developmental levels and skills. The commitment and leadership of school principals and Hume City Council, as a major preschool provider in the area, has been critical in driving this change and ensuring its sustainability in the longer term; and
- The Early Years Partnership is becoming a vehicle for driving changes further and through collaboration; agencies have been successful in obtaining new funding sources such as substantial funding from the Federal Government program, Communities for Children, which will enable the work commenced with **Best Start** to continue.

## What have been the barriers to achieving positive changes?

Frustrations with perceived slowness of change or lack of commitment are common within partnerships and will continue within the early years service system in Broadmeadows. It is critical that partner agencies respect the differences which exist between agencies and focus on achieving common, agreed goals and objectives, targeting improved outcomes for families and children, rather than blaming other agencies for inaction or focusing on aspects with which they are uncomfortable.

Competition between agencies was identified by some agencies as a barrier to effective partnering. This will continue to be a challenge for the service system, particularly while differing approaches to the allocation of resources exist between Federal and State Governments. It is important that agencies are mindful of the trap of competing with one another for kudos, influence and/or resources in the future. This has the potential to undermine the effective and positive early years service system that has emerged from the **Best Start** partnership, particularly when there are changes in senior management within partnership agencies.

## What does the service system need to focus on in the future to improve the health and wellbeing of young children in the catchment area of Best Start?

While the development of the ATSI Partnership has been effective in increasing awareness of agencies in working with ATSI families and has focussed attention within the service system on meeting the needs of ATSI children, the outcomes are yet to be realised. The most significant change identified by agencies across the service system was an awareness of the needs of ATSI families and their children and the need to make changes within their agencies to improve access and be more responsive to ATSI families. This is an important first step in including ATSI families and children in mainstream services. It takes time to develop services and systems which can address these needs. Communities for Children and the continued work of the partnership will focus on these concerns.

While some additional resources have been obtained, more resources are necessary. Agencies need to examine their organisational systems and structures to ensure that they can provide support to ATSI staff and service users in an environment which is "culturally safe".

Agencies indicated that transient families have not been effectively engaged in the service system and more intensive work is required to address this.

## Has the Broadmeadows Best Start partnership achieved its objectives?

The essential question of whether **Best Start** has achieved its objectives is not easy to answer clearly. Change in government policy – from one of competition to one of supporting and encouraging partnership and the change in policy and practice within Hume City Council – were clearly the driving forces for the development of more collaborative approaches and the increase in the quality of services. **Best Start** provided an important platform to facilitate the development of a more integrated and responsive service system. Quantifiable changes will continue to become evident over time.

The dedication and commitment of service providers to continue to work with each other and the leadership and direction provided by local government and the partner agencies, such as Broadmeadows UnitingCare, Dianella Community Health and Anglicare, have been critical success factors and will remain the essential elements for the continuation of improved outcomes for families and children. This is evidenced by the early collaboration that has occurred in the Broadmeadows School's Redevelopment Project, involving planning for five new community hub primary school sites in the area.

## A framework for the early years service system

Changes within the early years catchment have occurred across three levels – the micro level (the service delivery level), the meso level (the organisational level) and the macro level (the policy level). The changes at all three levels have influenced and impacted on the service system, developing an environment where positive changes for families and children are beginning to be observed and which will enable more systemic and individual changes to occur over time.

As evident through the consultation and examination of the data, changes in the indicators will take time. Many of the families who live within the Broadmeadows **Best Start** catchment area are severely disadvantaged on all measures and it takes time to engage with these families and to build trust which will result in improved levels of literacy and improved health outcomes in the longer term. Understanding the long-term dimensions of change is critical to the continuing engagement of service providers within the partnership and to continuing to engage with vulnerable families and their children.

A well functioning community is a healthy community. This develops from an inter-play between the economic, social, natural and physical environments. For individual families and children, their well-being is determined by a complex interplay of social, economic, cultural, spiritual and environmental factors.



A framework for the early years service system has emerged through this evaluation. The interrelated issues and context for the early years service system can be equated to the frameworks developed for addressing chronic health care conditions. This draws on the work of the World Health Organisation (WHO) in relation to innovative models of care for chronic conditions (WHO, 2004).

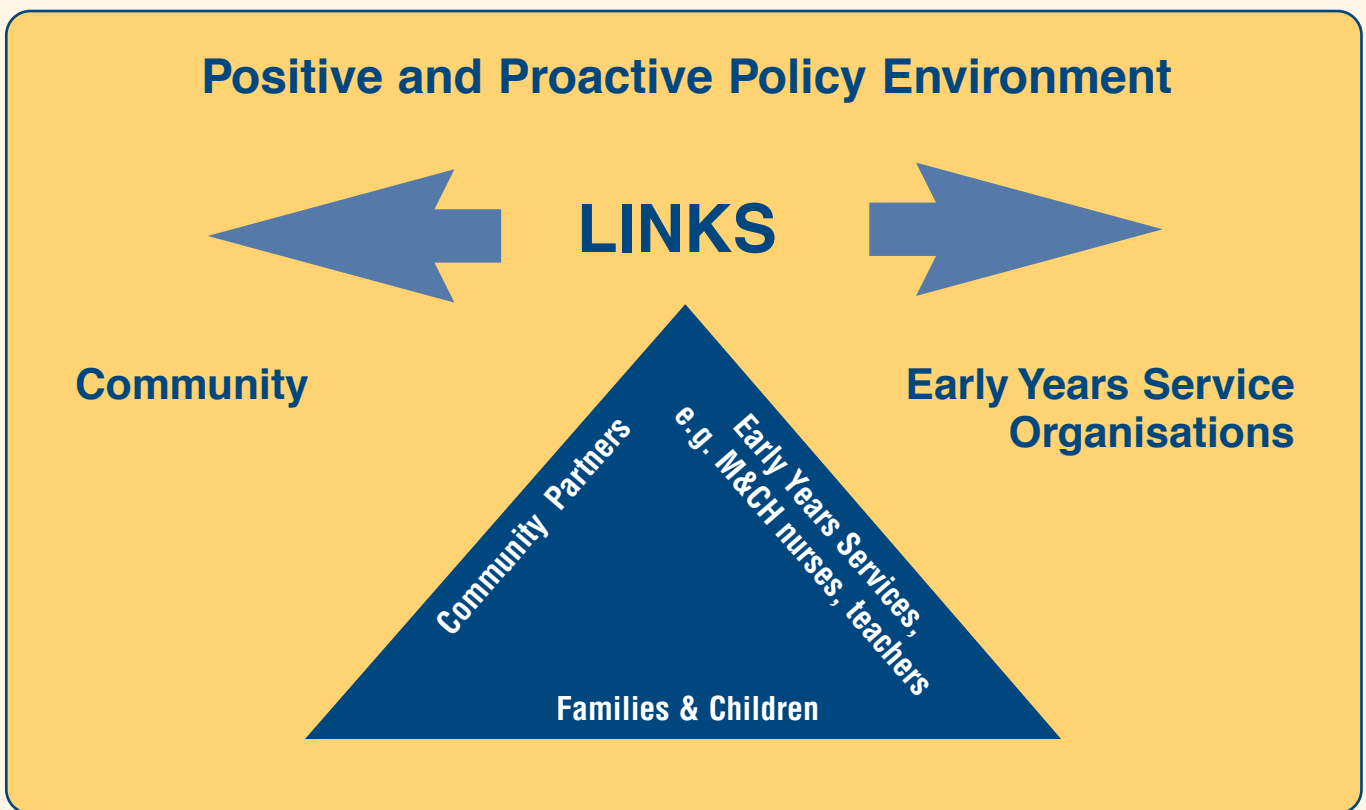
The framework is structured around three components – the micro level (individual children and families), the meso level (the broad range of organisation which provide services for children and families) and the macro level (Government policy – Federal, State and Local). These are the “building blocks” of the service system.

Policy development which engenders positive change, focussing on improving outcomes for families and children, is essential. This policy development also needs to be proactive to gain the commitment of agencies. This has been evident in the Best Start initiative, which committed the major state government stakeholder departments - the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training - and Local Government, to become key stakeholders in the process. Resources need to be allocated within funding agreements, to enable agencies to commit time and staffing resources to partnership development, without compromising service delivery hours.

Importantly, the change in policy direction at Federal and State Government levels, in recognition of the evidence of the importance of investment in the early years which has emerged from the research, has shifted the focus to children and families and investment in prevention and early intervention services.

For organisations, at the meso, or middle level, there are challenges to operate in a more eclectic manner, stepping away from a competent and insular style of operating, to developing partnerships with other agencies, in order to work together with families to address the complex and interrelated needs of children. This requires a change in culture for many agencies, which takes time. The evaluation has found that the key agencies recognise the need for these internal changes in their organisations are working towards achieving them.

At a micro level, families need to have access to affordable housing, sufficient income from employment to support their households, access to affordable quality health care and education, access to support services in a timely manner and information to increase their awareness and knowledge to support parenting. All families are committed to providing the best environment for their children to grow and develop, but many families need support to achieve this. Engagement of families in services – maternal and child health, preschool, school, family support services - is critical to ensuring that they are adequately equipped to taking responsibility for the nurturing of their children and have access to the resources they require to meet the needs of their individual children.



Source: Adapted from WHO Innovative Care for Chronic Conditions Framework, WHO, 2004

## Appendix 1: The Broadmeadows Early Years Partnership members 2006

### Management Group

Mark Sullivan	CEO, Dianella Community Health Services
Nicole Mahony	Director of City Communities, Hume City Council
Lee- Anne Biggs	Manager, Broadmeadows Family Care - Anglicare
Phil Conrick	Executive Director, Broadmeadows Uniting <i>Care</i>
Chris McDonnell	CEO, Orana Family Services
Lesley Hubble	Manager, North West Region, Child and Family Services Department of Human Services

### Community Partners Hume City Council

Vanessa Little	Manager, Global Learning Village, Hume City Council
Helen Broderick	Coordinator, Maternal Child Health, Hume City Council
Lisa Letic	Manager, Child and Family Services, Hume City Council
Rae Marsh-Delia	Coordinator, Preschool Services, Hume City Council

### Community Partners Education

Peter Enright	Department of Education and Training, Senior Education Officer, Northern Regional office
Anne Morton	Principal, Meadow Fair Nth PS, Rep: Broadmeadows Schools Network
Peter Hodson	Principal, Upfield Primary School
Megan Lewis	Principal, Coolaroo South Primary School
Valarie Karaitiana	Principal, Dallas Primary School

### Community Partners Child and Family Services

Lee-Anne Biggs	Manager, Broadmeadows Family Care - Anglicare
Maureen Bott	Manager, Orana Family Services
Leonie Symes	Executive Officer, Broad Insight
Sarina Greco	Manager, Brotherhood of St. Laurence
Judith Smale	Manager, Child, Family and Community Services, Melbourne City Mission

### Community Partners Health

Suzu Pinchen	Manager, Dianella Community Health Services
Debra O'Connor	Manager, Dianella Community Health Services
Daryl Nayler	ATSI Liaison, Austin Hospital and Local Parent Representative on the Partnership

### Community Partners other Community agencies

Gina Dougall	Hume Neighbourhood House Network
Margaret Rutherford	Migrant Resource Centre-North West
John Zika	Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG)
Rebecca O'Dowd	Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
Joe Narbaleek	Enmaraleek Inc.

### Community Partners Housing

Alan Wood	Manager, Homeground Housing Service
Rosalind Vincent	Manager, Neighbourhood Renewal, Office of Housing
Rob Salter	Salvation Army, Crossroads

### Community Partners Parents

Debra Murray	Local Parent Representative
Daryl Nayler	Local Parent Representative
Gul Erbasi	Local Parent Representative