Submission to the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee:
Local Safety Committee of the City of Yarra

Purpose

In response to the parliamentary inquiry on locally based approaches to community safety and crime prevention, this submission will discuss a locally based approach to a complex safety issue. This submission includes issues raised by some of members of the Local Safety Committee convened by the Yarra City Council and Victoria Police. The submission will provide:

- the context for community safety issues in the City of Yarra;
- an example of a locally based solution, its successes and limitations;
- an example of a similar issue in Kings Cross in Sydney; and
- recommendations for forward directions to address community safety across local and state levels.

Key Messages

The Local Safety Committee of the City of Yarra welcomes the new State Government’s commitment to improving safety and wellbeing, and is keen to work collaboratively to achieve this.

Local government, police and community agencies are well-equipped in developing local based solutions to community safety. However local agencies operate within a State Government policy framework for community safety, which can be poorly targeted to addressing the particular needs of a local government area. The divide between the legal and policy framework and the service response can lead to unsustainable outcomes in addressing community safety. Local agencies lack authority and resources in effectively responding to local needs.

The Local Safety Committee urges a review of the current State legislation and policy that governs community safety. It is crucial that the legislation and policy is an appropriate response to the community safety issues experienced on the ground in order to achieve effective solutions.
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Introduction

The City of Yarra faces particular localised crime and safety issues. Some of these are related to its proximity to the central business district, large public housing population (about 10 percent of the total municipal population) and busy entertainment precincts.

Some of the key safety issues in the City of Yarra include the negative impacts of alcohol and illicit drug consumption on the community. The entertainment precincts of Swan Street in Richmond, Brunswick and Smith Streets in Fitzroy and Collingwood are often associated with amenity impacts for the community, public drunkenness, and occasionally anti-social behaviour. Victoria Street in North Richmond and Abbotsford currently has the highest volume of heroin dealing in Victoria which brings with it crime, amenity and safety impacts for the community. Further, the City of Yarra has a visible Aboriginal community of which some members have long-term problematic use of alcohol.

Local government, Police, drug and alcohol services, community health services and other local services in the City of Yarra play a key role in addressing community safety. Since 2004, Yarra City Council in conjunction with Yarra Police Services Area convened a Local Safety Committee (the Committee) to bring together diverse agencies to identify and respond to local safety issues. Members of the Committee include Victoria Police, Yarra City Council, Department of Health, Office of Housing, the Neighbourhood Justice Centre, Yarra Drug and Health Forum, Youth Support and Advocacy Services, North Yarra Community Health and North Richmond Community Health.

The Committee provides a forum to share information among members which enables diverse agencies to understand one another and form synergies which in turn facilitates a more coordinated and collaborative approach to responding to the community.

The Yarra Drug and Health Forum, a member of the Committee, is a very important local network in the City of Yarra. The Forum represents a broad range of agencies and other organisations and facilitates discussion and advocacy around illicit drug and alcohol issues with the emphasis on solutions, which complements the role of the Committee. The Forum is a great example of how the community can be engaged at the local level, thereby providing a conduit to government and other agencies in terms of policy development.
Locally based approach: an example

An initiative called ‘Taking Action Together’ facilitated through the Local Safety Committee in 2010 is an example of a locally based approach to alleviate the impacts of illicit drugs in the City of Yarra, in particular around Victoria Street in North Richmond and Abbotsford. In developing practical solutions, 70 representatives of a range of agencies including State Government; Department of Health and VicHealth, came together to share and identify potential solutions. 34 actions were agreed to.

Many of the solutions are based on principles of a cross-sector approach and close engagement with the community impacted by illicit drugs including injecting drug users. For example a very successful action out of Taking Action Together was the development of a street art mural in a laneway. The laneway is commonly used for injecting drugs, which created amenity and safety concerns for the community. Though a simple action, it was successful on many levels:

- engaged illegal graffiti artists to productive, commissioned activity;
- created an open space and thoroughfare for visitors, traders and residents of and around Victoria Street;
- formed positive, constructive partnerships between Victoria Street traders and Yarra City Council in seeking traders’ support for the mural; and
- achieved outcomes of improved amenity and safety in that particular area through the minimisation of discarded syringes and incidences of public injecting.

Taking Action Together also demonstrated the benefits of a coordinated approach. While injecting drug use is displaced as a result of opening up the laneway, this is complemented with another action to engage with users about safe injecting and appropriate disposal of injecting equipment through a peer education program. This program has been provided with funding from the Department of Health, Neighbourhood Justice Centre and Yarra City Council.

Other solutions identified included, promoting responses and supports available to the community. Through informing community members, particularly residents and traders about which services and agencies can respond to which issues, this empowers community to take control and manage their concerns. Promoting responses and supports available to the community also ensures that there is a consistent and mutually understood service response across the multiple sectors. Agencies themselves are not always clear which agency is most appropriate to respond to particular issues and as a result, can displace responsibility on to other agencies.

The experiences from this locally based approach demonstrate that collaboration among local agencies including Police and Council, community members and State Government is necessary to facilitate improvements in community safety.

Shortcomings from a locally based approach
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While Taking Action Together is a well-intentioned initiative to alleviate impacts of illicit drugs for the community, 12 months since the start of the project, of the 34 actions agreed to, six have been completed, eight underway, nine may still be completed and 11 had no action. Several limitations are apparent:

1. Policy constraints – developing solutions that minimise amenity and safety concerns that align with the State Government policy framework of a harm reduction approach, as well as a law and order approach to responding to illicit drug use is difficult. Additionally, public discourse on innovative ways of managing the impacts of illicit drugs is limited.

2. Limited sustainability – developing practical local-based solutions to address amenity and safety concerns skirt around the underlying issue of illegal drugs. Locally based solutions do not address the underlying causes of illegal drug use.

3. Limited capacity - most organisations are already fully committed and it is difficult to prioritise new and additional work despite the intention to do so.

4. Limited coordination and support – there are limited additional resources available for project management.

The outcomes and lessons from Taking Action Together mirrors a number of other locally based initiatives developed across the City of Yarra. Many underpin the principles of community engagement, are well-targeted and represent collaboration across health, Police and government sectors. However, they are often unsustainable for the reasons outlined above.

For example, bi-annual intensive police operations, ‘Operation Elizabeth’ which take place across the City of Yarra targeted to disrupt illicit drug activity is an example of a coordinated community policing approach. In this operation, once Police apprehended a person dealing or using illicit drugs, the accused was offered referrals to service agencies by a drug and agency worker who was based at the police station during the operation. Such an approach recognises the health issue in use of illicit drugs, however this approach still operates within a legal and policy framework where the addictive use of illicit drugs is criminalised. Consequently, without any fundamental change in Federal and State government policy, such as de-criminalising the use of certain drugs, the Police will continue to respond to the crime associated with illicit drug use, and local government and agencies will continue to respond to the health and amenity issues. With the overarching policy disconnect, neither approach will effectively resolve the problem.

Local government in conjunction with local services and agencies are often well placed and expected by State Government to respond to community safety at a local level. However within existing resources and legal and policy frameworks, the development of and sustainability of locally based approaches are limited. The current State Government legislation and policy governing community safety does not facilitate responses to community safety which addresses the core of the problem. Further, while local government, Police and agencies are expected to respond to the health, safety and amenity issues of
the community, these agencies are not empowered to manage resources to adequately respond to the needs of the community.

Experiences elsewhere

Drawing on experiences in Kings Cross, Sydney, this submission will discuss a successful locally based approach to addressing the impact of illicit drugs on the community. Like North Richmond and Abbotsford area, the community of Kings Cross faced a complex and uncomfortable problem of high visibility of heroin use, dealing and overdose deaths, and therefore high volumes of public injecting, inappropriately discarded syringes and related crime. Ultimately in the late 1990s, the Kings Cross community was advocating for serious change to improve the amenity, crime and safety associated with illicit drug use.

With strong support from diverse community members, government and local agencies of Kings Cross, the Royal Commission into the NSW police service recommended the establishment of an injecting centre in a high-risk area to provide health and public amenity and safety benefits. It was argued the benefits would outweigh the policy considerations against condoning otherwise unlawful behaviour. (Commissioner: The Hon Justice JRT Wood, Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service Final Report Volume II: Reform, May 1997, p.222) A supervised injecting centre was subsequently established by the NSW Government in 2001.

Ten years since its opening, the latest independent evaluation of the Sydney Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (the Centre) by KPMG reports:

- the high cost savings in health ($658,000 per annum);
- the huge amenity benefits for the community (residents of Kings Cross observed a 20 percent drop in the number of discarded syringes from 2000 to 2010, and similarly, traders observed over a 30 percent drop), and;
- police support for a harm minimisation approach because of improved understanding of drug use from a health perspective.

The evaluation also reports the reduction in property crime and incidence of robbery since the operation of the Centre. (KPMG, Further evaluation of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre during its extended Trial period (2007-2011) - Final Report, September 2010, pp.193-194)

Consultation with a senior officer from the Centre and Kings Cross Police reveals it is considered a successful partnership between the health and police sector because of a mutual respect and increased understanding of the nature of the issue.

The success of the approach is ultimately due to State Government support and because of a strong community voice and mutual understanding of the issue. This example demonstrates that a local initiative which operates within a legal and policy framework that recognises cross-sector input and provides resources, can have substantive benefits to community safety, “an improved quality of life in the local community at Kings Cross and made the streets of that community feel safer”. (Second Reading
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Speech, Legislative Council, NSW Drug Misuse and Trafficking Amendment (Medically Supervised Injecting Centre) Bill 2010, p.4)
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Conclusion

The new Government’s commitment to improving safety and wellbeing for all Victorians is laudable and aligns with the aspirations of the Yarra Local Safety Committee. It is worth noting that after a decade of effort to address challenging, even relentless, anti-social and illegal behaviour in Yarra, a thorough consideration of the evidence base now guides local responses. The Local Safety Committee believe that an evidence based approach, combined with a dialogue with services at the coal face will lead inevitably to a conclusion that an equal allocation of resources to preventive, health focused strategies and law and order responses which will have most likelihood of improving safety and wellbeing for Victorians.

Currently legislation and policy on drugs and crime operates on a top-down basis across Government. This has significant drawbacks as discussed throughout this submission. This submission seeks recognition from the State Government that a bottom-up approach facilitates a more holistic and effective response which will enable more sustainable solutions to community safety, as seen in the case of reducing the impact of illicit drugs on the community of Kings Cross in Sydney.

This submission demonstrates that local agencies of the City of Yarra are effective at developing locally based approaches to address community safety and that these responses are largely under-funded. Agencies of the City of Yarra understand that a collaborative, coordinated and community development approach is most effective at addressing local community safety issues.

This submission seeks to reinforce that to improve outcomes in community safety the following changes are recommended:

- a community safety legislative and policy framework which aligns with, and responds to, the local community safety issues; and
- allocation of resources which is commensurate with the level of services required to advocate for, and respond to, local safety issues.

The Yarra Local Safety Committee looks forward to an ongoing dialogue with the government about this in the interests of all Victorians.