

Growing Brimbank

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO LIFTING
HEALTH AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES



A time for reflection 2017

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The Growing Brimbank program is a long term collaboration between AHPC at VU and the City of Brimbank, in the west of Melbourne. In 2018 Brimbank is the third most socio-economically disadvantaged metropolitan local government area in Victoria. The Growing Brimbank program aims to translate the evidence of 'what works' to lift health, wellbeing and education outcomes across the lifecourse in the Brimbank community.

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Executive Summary

Aims

The aim of this evaluation was to obtain reflections from both Victoria University and Brimbank City Council Staff on their experience of Growing Brimbank, in particular focusing on the perceived benefits, challenges, opportunities of being part of Growing Brimbank and the utility of the Growing Brimbank foundation reports.

In 2017, twenty-four staff from the organisations participated in telephone interviews. Participants represented a range of levels of seniority in the two organisations, providing a wide range of views and experiences.

Findings

This evaluation found Growing Brimbank provided a number of challenges but also provided benefits and opportunities.

1. Challenges

A number of challenging areas were identified including: commitment of time and funding; the complexity of Growing Brimbank; that the two organisations are ‘not in the same business’ and have different expectations, demands, cultures and ways of working; and how to involve others working in the community. Evaluation was also identified as a challenge

Time and money

Participants recognised that for Growing Brimbank to achieve its goals of lifting health and education outcomes required a long term commitment. A major challenge or threat to achieving this goal was therefore the lack of a long term commitment of funding to resource Growing Brimbank. Attempting to fund Growing Brimbank only from philanthropic funds, which generally focus on single issues with limited funding, proved distracting and tended to fragment the work by once again focusing in single issues.

Understanding Growing Brimbank, organisational demands, expectations and cultures

Both organisations were used to working with projects but Growing Brimbank is not just multiple projects. It is complex and many layered. Struggling to describe it and to come to terms with its complexity also meant participants struggled to know how to engage with Growing Brimbank. Participants noted that, understandably, BCC staff often struggled to understand how Growing Brimbank related to their work and to what extent they could be or were expected to be involved. From a VU perspective, Growing Brimbank was perceived as not taking a traditional academic approach, where research is about projects, funding and students. It was not always clear what the benefits of being involved were for staff in either organisation. This caution was set against a context of major structural changes for both organisations.

Evaluation: how will we know we are making a difference?

Participants recognised that evaluation of Growing Brimbank was important to know if it is successful, but challenging. We need to be able to collect and use relevant data. But we also need interim data because we can't wait 10 to 15 years to see if we have improved health and education outcomes. Furthermore, with population change (e.g. possible gentrification) how will we be able to attribute improvements to the actions of Growing Brimbank?

2. Benefits and opportunities

Participants identified a number of benefits of being part of Growing Brimbank. These included increased support and capacity to use evidence to better inform the development of policies, strategies in BCC and for VU researchers to develop strong partnerships with a community. Participants from both organisations said Growing Brimbank provided opportunities to work differently.

Using evidence

Growing Brimbank and the foundation reports provided BCC and VU with useful information, providing an evidence base to draw on to develop policy and advocacy programs for BCC. Some VU staff reported that Growing Brimbank had made an important intellectual contribution to their work and allowed them and VU students to better understand the community in which they worked, studied and lived.

Informing work and planning

The evidence provided by Growing Brimbank, especially from the foundation reports was used by BCC to:

- target service delivery and use evidence to support a different way of doing things
- influence council plans, strategies, actions and budget
- work together proactively to forecast the work required and map it out to better meet needs of the community

Working across the organisations bringing new opportunities

Participants valued the opportunity that Growing Brimbank gave them to begin to develop strong links across the organisations. BCC staff valued being able to draw on VU expertise exposing them to different ways of thinking, information and contacts. VU participants valued the opportunity to develop strong partnerships with Brimbank in order to develop interventions that meet the needs of the community and would therefore be more effective, to be better able to contribute to public health. Both organisations said that Growing Brimbank enabled them to broaden their networks within their organisations.

3. Use of Growing Brimbank foundation reports

The Brimbank Atlas of Health and Education

The Brimbank Atlas of Health and Education was described as a central and credible source of information providing an overview of what Brimbank looks like. It was considered to be extremely useful because unlike other sources of data, it links both health and education data and provides data at the suburb level. The Atlas has been used in service planning, council report, plans and strategic documents, negotiation with other levels of government, funding applications and to inform further commissioned work.

The Brimbank Physical and Social Infrastructure Spatial Map Report

This report had just been released at the time of the interviews. Those participants who were aware of it believed it would be a useful tool for service planning. Both this report and the Atlas were also identified as being an excellent resource for VU students and had been used this year with third year public health students.

The Physical Activity, Sport and Health in the City of Brimbank Report

This report was used to inform the needs analysis for the redevelopment of the St Albans Leisure Centre, commissioned by BCC and undertaken by VU researchers and was used for the council's recent Brimbank Community Services 2017 Review. It was noted that the omission of soccer, a major sport in Brimbank, limited its use as a tool for advocacy and planning.

4. Achievements and successes

A number of achievements attributed to the Growing Brimbank were identified. These included the needs analysis for the redevelopment of the St Albans Leisure Centre, undertaken by VU for BCC; embedding Growing Brimbank in the Council's Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan.

Needs analysis for the redevelopment of the St Albans Leisure Centre

This was identified by many participants as one of the best examples of how Growing Brimbank has contributed to changing what is being done. The report provided a rigorous analysis of the needs and profile of the community and what the community wanted. This enabled BCC staff to think widely and differently about what type of facility the community needed and changed what was planned for the redevelopment of the leisure centre. The success of this report and the outcomes from it has led staff to say they would use this process again for the review of other services.

Conclusion

Growing Brimbank was identified as ground breaking, an important opportunity for VU and BCC and the Brimbank community to work together to lift the health and education outcomes across the life course in Brimbank. Many of the challenges were also seen as potential benefits for example, with a long term commitment to change the organisations would be able to develop shared vision and understanding, be able to work together to harness the organisations' different skills and expertise to make a difference in the community. To achieve this Growing Brimbank needed to increase its visibility and be further embedded in the work of both organisations.

Background and aims

Growing Brimbank is a collaboration between the Australian Health Policy Collaboration (AHPC), Victoria University (VU) and Brimbank City Council (BCC) which began in 2013. It aims to lift health and education outcomes in the population living in Brimbank, an area of significant socioeconomic disadvantage in Melbourne's west. It takes a place based systems approach to the development and implementation of integrated policies, services and strategies across the life course.

There are many challenges to developing meaningful collaborations and working across sectors and it is now time to take stock of what Growing Brimbank has achieved and to assess how the Growing Brimbank products (The Brimbank Health and Education Atlas, 2014; Physical Activity, Sport and Health in the City of Brimbank, 2014; Brimbank Spatial Map of Physical and Social Infrastructure, 2017) have been used.

The aim of this evaluation was to capture the experience of, and reflect on Growing Brimbank from the perspective of the partners: Brimbank City Council, Australian Health Policy Collaboration and others at Victoria University. The findings from this evaluation will be used by the partners to inform the future directions of Growing Brimbank, so that we know how the collaboration can be strengthened and what can be done in the future?

Methods

To address the aims of the evaluation brief interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders. In 2017, potential participants were identified because they have been involved in the development of Growing Brimbank, had held senior executive roles in the institutions and/or had participated in regular meetings, and been involved in the Growing Brimbank workshops.

Participants: Twenty-four people participated in the interviews. Participants represented a range of levels of seniority in the two organisations providing a wide range of views and experiences.

Procedure: Telephone interviews were conducted at a time suitable to the participants and took between 15 to 30 minutes.

Interviews were recorded to assist note taking but were not transcribed. The interviews covered the following topics:

- the participants' role in Growing Brimbank
- their experience of the collaboration
- the challenges and the achievements of Growing Brimbank to date
- future challenges and benefits
- awareness and use of the foundation reports (e.g. Brimbank Atlas etc)
- experience of the workshops and working group

Ethics: Ethics approval was obtained from Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, approval number HRE17049.

Analysis: The interviews were summarised following the themes described above, drawing on both the similarities in experiences and perceptions of both BCC and VU participants and differences between these.

Findings

This evaluation found Growing Brimbank provided a number of challenges but also provided benefits and opportunities. Indeed many of the challenges were also identified as strengths of Growing Brimbank. The following details these challenges, benefits and opportunities, the use and utility of the foundation reports and Growing Brimbank achievements and successes.

Challenges

A number of challenging areas were identified by participants of both organisations. These included: commitment of time and funding by the organisations; the complexity of Growing Brimbank; that the two organisations are 'not in the same business' and have different expectations, demands, cultures and ways of working, and how to involve others working in the community. Evaluation was also identified as a challenge.

Time and money

Participants recognised that for Growing Brimbank to achieve its goals of lifting health and education outcomes it needed sustained commitment.

Change takes time

We won't know for a long time if it works

The challenge is to keep it going because the benefit will not be realised if it's not ongoing.

A major challenge or threat to achieving this goal was therefore the lack of a long-term commitment of funding to resource Growing Brimbank. Both BCC and VU are used to and operate comfortably with the short-term project funding models used by government, philanthropy and research funding agencies, while recognising the limitations of these models. Hence, initially there was an expectation that new project money was needed to resource the implementation and evaluation of any new interventions/programs in Growing Brimbank.

We hoped VU would bring money to do innovative things... [BCC]

We can do the work but we need to get funding to do it ... [VU]

However, attempting to fund Growing Brimbank only from philanthropic funds, which generally focus on single issues with limited funding, proved distracting, tended to fragment the work, leading once again to focusing in single issues and to the perception that nothing was happening when in effect work was and could be initiated with no new money.

Growing Brimbank is a tool to promote action and it is really important to recognise that we are already acting

The lack of financial commitment from the organisations made getting substantial external funds more difficult.

Understanding Growing Brimbank, organisational demands, expectations and cultures

Both organisations are used to working with projects but Growing Brimbank is not just multiple projects but is complex and many layered. Struggling to describe it and to come to terms with its complexity meant participants struggled to know:

- how to engage with Growing Brimbank.
- how Growing Brimbank related to their work and to what extent they could be or were expected to be involved
- how it related to their other partnerships and their other work

It was not always clear what the benefits of being involved were for staff in either organisation. This caution was set against a context of major structural changes for both organisations.

What is Growing Brimbank?

Participants described confusion and experienced a lack of clarity about what Growing Brimbank is, who 'owns it' and who is responsible for implementing it. Growing Brimbank was recognised as being complex, more than a set of projects but while it needed a simpler language to 'sell it' this posed the challenge of giving the wrong message and that Growing Brimbank lacked focus.

...but using simpler language to sell it creates a challenge in itself as it can give the wrong message that we are talking about discrete programs and projects and target groups

Growing Brimbank is different. It is not just a set of projects but broader but this makes it look like it lacks focus

It is a broad piece of work with multiple layers but this can be distracting

Describing it as a 'platform' was also confusing as people assume this means it is IT related or digital.

Notwithstanding the complexity of Growing Brimbank, there was an appreciation that we needed to do things differently rather than deliver or trial new programs and projects and Growing Brimbank provided this opportunity:

Studies and projects that just focused on adding GP services to another area or interventions on physical activity etc would not make a difference

What is needed is a multi-disciplinary multi focus approach to deal with complex problems

Addressing medical problems is about 10% of the issues or problems in the community

Growing Brimbank is unique and we and the community are fortunate to benefit from it

Engaging with Growing Brimbank

Both organisations are experienced in implementing projects or programs. They have the structures in place to do so e.g. a designated project manager; clear descriptions of aims and outcomes, time bounded, etc. But as Growing Brimbank is not a project participants from both organisations described their struggle and sometimes their confusion with how to engage with it and how to describe it. Growing Brimbank is not 'business as usual' for either organisation. They identified unclear boundaries with participants asking questions like:

- what does the partnership include?
- how much can each organisation provide the other without additional resources?

And importantly

- what does this partnership bring over and above the already existing strong partnerships they have and why would we spend energy on this new one?

Furthermore, Brimbank City Council and Victoria University have different work cultures and even within these organisations there are different cultures. Council staff work is driven by work plans to implement Council's strategic plans. They perceived themselves as having less autonomy than researchers might have and were unclear if they had the authority to be involved in Growing Brimbank and to what extent. For researchers, the culture is to bring in grant money to undertake research and they perceived themselves as having little capacity to engage without extra money.

A further challenge is that BCC and VU have their own histories, present and futures. Both are complex entities and both have other activities, challenges going on.

Things happen beyond the partnership

BCC has a newly elected council, new building and new CEO. VU is undergoing restructuring in terms of how they teach (First Year College) and restructuring the focus, funding and oversight of its research. Growing Brimbank is not the usual day job for either organisation.

The Table below summarises, from the participants' perspectives, the organisations' contexts, how they work and suggestions for getting buy in for Growing Brimbank and embedding it within the organisations.

Table 1. Engaging with Growing Brimbank: organisational culture and expectations

	BCC	VU
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> major changes, new building, new CEO, new councillors Brimbank is a difficult & diverse community local government is very complex and is not a single entity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> major changes and demands complex organisation challenges financially changing structures
Not my job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Council staff are at the coal face with demands on their time there are levels of responsibility & unclear how GB fits with this; within council few dedicated staff to be across the whole thing BCC staff not currently understand GB, its focus or how it relates to their work BCC staff have limited capacity to be involved or to know whether they should/expected to be involved in Growing Brimbank 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> research is very much about projects, about funding and students not traditional academic approach that researchers understand do not have the place-based, whole system/ life course approach model of research VU researchers are not clear what is the benefit to them? Ask 'what's going on'? How can I use this?
Getting buy in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> getting councillors to own it finding buy in across council and how everyone can relate to GB getting an understanding of what GB is; different parts of BCC are at different levels. Takes time to come to grips with it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> some support for GB in the college but question how engaging with collaboration meets their needs needs wider uni buy in and awareness – would like to see more engagement needs to be able to be used to produce research and academic outcomes
How to embed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> need to maintain dynamic contributors at BCC GB core team – need this to articulate what GB is all about to change perceptions across council GB needs to be in BCC plans and staff work plans need strategic framework so staff know what it is all about 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> needs greater visibility in VU how to integrate with other institutes across VU to increase stability - this is worthwhile because the work is ground breaking – within and beyond Brimbank need to be strategic and smarter across the college the key will be to work so that staff and students benefit from the collaboration

Working together and engaging other partners

Further challenges for Growing Brimbank to continue and succeed were engaging other stakeholders, partnerships, the community sector and other levels of government.

There are many players involved, layers of government. It's a challenge to bring the different parties together

Engaging the community sectors is challenging but valuable

How do we begin to include, involve and influence other levels of government, and the community service providers?

Building the collaboration so that BCC and VU were able to work together better was seen as important. The expectation that Growing Brimbank was a long term commitment was seen as an opportunity to be able to do this, so that the organisations could develop shared language and vision and align their goals.

We need to be working on the same page, be clear what we both want and this needs good communication

Acknowledging that there are differences in the work of the two organisations and developing an appreciation of why things are done the way they are and understanding each other and their role and level of influence was important and could be achieved through partnership.

Evaluation: how will we know we are making a difference?

Participants recognised that evaluation of Growing Brimbank was important to know if it is successful, but challenging. We need to be able to collect and use relevant data. But we also need interim data because we can't wait 10 to 15 years to see if we have improved health and education outcomes. Furthermore, with population change (e.g. possible gentrification) how will we be able to attribute improvements to the actions of Growing Brimbank?

Benefits and opportunities

Participants identified a number of benefits of being part of Growing Brimbank. These included increased support and capacity to use evidence to better inform the development of policies, strategies in BCC and for VU researchers to develop strong partnerships with a community. Participants from both organisations said Growing Brimbank provided opportunities to work differently.

Using evidence

Growing Brimbank and the foundation reports provided BCC and VU with useful information to apply to the planning of facilities, services and projects that was data driven and evidence based for this particular community. While BCC staff said it provided an evidence base to draw on to develop policy and advocacy programs for BCC, VU staff reported that it had made an important intellectual contribution to their work and allowed them and VU students to better understand the community in which they worked, studied and lived.

Growing Brimbank provides an evidence base to draw on to develop policy and advocacy programs

Facilitates the translation of evidence and is informative and useful information

There are some real gems in the Atlas. [For some things] we are used to looking at state level sourced data. The Atlas includes other data which tells a different story about uptake of services. It is useful to have this different data

Informing work and planning

The evidence provided by Growing Brimbank, especially from the foundation reports was used by BCC to inform the development of strategies and actions, target service delivery and facilitate changing how things are done.

This facilitates service planning to increase level of services and be clear who they are for and what services are achieving with no increase in funding

We can now target our service delivery and use evidence to support a different way of doing things – this is a real selling point

Working across the organisations bringing new opportunities

Participants valued the opportunity that Growing Brimbank gave them to begin to develop strong links across the organisations. BCC staff valued being able to draw on VU expertise exposing them to different ways of thinking, information and contacts. VU participants valued the opportunity to develop strong partnerships with Brimbank in order to develop interventions that meet the needs of the community and would therefore be more effective, to be better able to contribute to public health. Both organisations said that Growing Brimbank enabled them to broaden their networks within their organisations. BCC and VU have different strengths that can complement each other.

Growing Brimbank provides the opportunity of working with AHPC and Brimbank and to open up an area of research

Involvement in Growing Brimbank brings me increased knowledge and provides more opportunities to contribute to child public health

It has exposed us to ways of thinking, information and contacts that we don't normally have

Being involved in Growing Brimbank has broadened my networks and increased links across VU

Growing Brimbank is unique and we are fortunate to benefit from it

Recognising strengths of each organisation

Participants recognised that each organisation had different strengths which, when brought together, would strengthen planning and service delivery, better meeting the community needs and ultimately having impacts on health and education outcomes.

BCC knows its community and has strong partnerships with other community service providers. It delivers services to the community and develops strategy and policy

VU brings expertise in the evidence base, new sources of data or the presentation of known data differently which are an important and resource for BCC planning and strategy. It provides data and evidence that can be applied to the planning of facilities, services and projects.

Capacity to facilitate change

Long term commitment means that the differences in the two cultures can be explored, understood and shared values and vision can be developed into a strong partnership with advantages for both.

The experience with Growing Brimbank means a working, ongoing partnership. So instead of using an external consultant we can work with VU. This is quicker and better than using an external consultant as VU knows the community and cares about it. They do not just fulfil the brief and then ‘walk away’.

Use of Growing Brimbank foundation reports

The foundation reports have been used to contribute to planning, advocacy, and development of future work. They have also been used with VU students. These resources could be further embedded in the VU curriculum by providing VU teaching staff with three to four lectures that would be available for a number of courses across the university.

The Brimbank Atlas of Health and Education

The Brimbank Atlas of Health and Education was described as a central and credible source of information providing an overview of what Brimbank looks like. It was considered to be extremely useful because unlike other sources of data, it links both health and education data and provides data at the suburb level. The Atlas has been used in service planning, council reports, plans and strategic documents, negotiation with other levels of government, funding applications and to inform further commissioned work. Participants said that it:

- brings everything together and helps to tell a story
- has credibility
- tells why we should do things, describes the extent of the problem; reassures us that we will start well. It’s a tool kit
- reminds us of the things like level of English proficiency ... we overestimate proficiency and need to include this information in planning and delivering our services
- uses different data to what we often rely on – this reminds us to put the different data sources together for better planning/infrastructure
- is full of gems and we need to make sure we use it for strategy and planning and to negotiate with Departments
- is valuable, affirming & confirming – provides evidence to be confident in what to prioritise
- provides evidence on health and wellbeing issues at the suburb level which is not usually provided in other reports
- is extremely valuable because it links education and health

The Atlas has been used to inform service planning, council reports, plans and strategic documents, negotiating with other levels of government, developing funding applications and in further commissioned work. It has also been used as a resource for teaching undergraduate students.

The Brimbank Physical and Social Infrastructure Spatial Map Report

This report had just been released at the time of the interviews. Those participants who were aware of it believed it would be a useful tool for service planning. Both this report and the Atlas were also identified as being an excellent resource for VU students and had been used this year with third year public health students.

This will be a powerful and useful tool for service planning because it provides concrete data to advocate for where to put new services

It helps to focus on the effects of the environment and is an eye opener especially as you can use the GIS to overlay maps of different services.

It is an excellent resource for VU students. They could engage with the data because of its proximity to their experience and reality

The Physical Activity, Sport and Health in the City of Brimbank Report

This report was used to inform the needs analysis for the redevelopment of the St Albans Leisure Centre, commissioned by BCC and undertaken by VU researchers and was used for the council's recent Brimbank Community Services 2017 Review. It was noted that the omission of soccer, a major sport in Brimbank, limited its use as a tool for advocacy and planning.

Achievements and successes

A number of achievements attributed to the Growing Brimbank were identified. These included the needs analysis for the redevelopment of the St Albans Leisure Centre; embedding Growing Brimbank in the Council's Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan.

Needs analysis for the redevelopment of the St Albans Leisure Centre

This was identified by many participants as one of the best examples of how Growing Brimbank has contributed to changing what is being done. The report provided a rigorous analysis of the needs and profile of the community and what the community wanted. This enabled BCC staff to think widely and differently about what type of facility the community needed and changed what was planned for the redevelopment of the leisure centre.

This report looked at health and community needs which helped us to think widely/differently about what type of facility the community needed

Actually changed what we planned to do with the redevelopment of the leisure centre

Would use the process of how this report was done again

The success of this report and the outcomes has led to further use of this model including commissioning a review of best evidence interventions to increase physical activity across the life course and a co-produced review of early childhood services.

Conclusion

Growing Brimbank was identified as ground breaking, an important opportunity for VU and BCC and the Brimbank community to work together to lift the health and education outcomes across the life course in Brimbank. Many of the challenges were also seen as potential benefits for example, with a long term commitment to change the organisations would be able to develop shared vision and understanding, be able to work together to harness the organisations' different skills and expertise to make a difference in the community. To achieve this Growing Brimbank needed to increase its visibility and be further embedded in the work of both organisations.

Growing Brimbank is unique and we and the community are fortunate to benefit from it.

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A complete directory of the interventions, the individual projects briefs, the supporting research program and resourcing requirements is available upon request from deborah.law@vu.edu.au