

Best Start in action

Project guidelines

Best Start

Improving the health, development, learning and wellbeing of children in Victoria

Jointly auspiced by the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training

October 2005



Best Start
www.beststart.vic.gov.au



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Foreword

This document has been developed as a project resource for those interested or involved in the Best Start project. It is divided into three main sections:

- Section 1 provides background information about the Best Start project and its development
- Section 2 provides guidance for those undertaking a Best Start project including establishing local Best Start partnerships, developing and implementing an action plan, monitoring and reporting on activity, evaluation, and sustaining changes beyond the life of the project.
- Section 3 provides information about governance, funding, contracting and project administration.

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Section 1

Introduction

Best Start is a whole of government early years project jointly auspiced by the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training.

Best Start aims to improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of all Victorian children from pregnancy through transition to school (0-8 years). These aims are being achieved by supporting communities, parents and service providers to improve universal early years services so they are more responsive to local needs. The strong emphasis in the work of Best Start is on prevention and early intervention.

These improvements in services are expected to result in:

- better access to child and family support, health services and early education
- improvements in parents' capacity, confidence and enjoyment of family life
- communities that are more child and family friendly.

Background

Best Start Phase 1

Phase 1 of Best Start (2001–2002) focused on project design and development and engendered interest and engagement of key departments that impact on the lives of young children and their families.

Project outputs during this phase included:

- a report on the evidence base underpinning the rationale for investment in early childhood, *Best Start evidence base: best start for children, the evidence base underlying investment in the early years (children 0-8)* (Department of Human Services, 2001) (www.beststart.vic.gov.au)
- the development of a range of Best Start indicators to measure progress based on the evidence *Best Start indicators project* (Department of Human Services, 2001) (www.beststart.vic.gov.au)
- a report on program types and interventions for which there is evidence regarding their effectiveness in improving outcomes for children and families, *Best Start: effective intervention programs: examples of effective interventions, programs and service models* (Department of Human Services, 2001) (www.beststart.vic.gov.au)
- a communication strategy
- an evaluation framework.

Best Start Phase 2

Phase 2 (2002–2006) saw the implementation of 11 mainstream and two Aboriginal Best Start projects. These projects, originally due to be completed during 2006, have been extended. The mainstream projects have been allocated \$40,000 recurrently to maintain facilitation of the partnership and build on the work undertaken in each site.

The Aboriginal project was developed in two phases: the development of the *Aboriginal Best Start status report* and the implementation of two Aboriginal specific sites. The Aboriginal projects have been extended for a further 12 months and allocated \$40,000 recurrently as per the mainstream sites.

Also during this stage, the Breaking Cycles Building Futures research project, funded by the Premiers' Drug Prevention Council, was undertaken to identify barriers to service inclusion. The final report identifies a model for improving access to services and strategies to promote more inclusive antenatal and universal early years services that better engage and assist vulnerable families (www.beststart.vic.gov.au).

The Best Start evaluation also commenced in Phase 2, providing support and important information to project partnerships and government about 'what is being tried, what is working and for whom'. Reports from the Best Start evaluation will be available to inform the current projects.

Best Start Phase 3

Phase 3 (2005–2009) is an opportunity for Best Start to translate and apply the learnings gained from the demonstration sites to the new sites. In addition, new directions of the Office for Children will continue to inform project development. Some changes include:

- further refinement of the statewide indicators
- improving the analysis of outcome data to inform planning and evaluation
- more targeted action plans incorporating interventions that are evidence-based
- strengthening partnership development
- using the learnings to improve the engagement of vulnerable children and families.

Phase 3 also includes:

- ten new mainstream Best Start projects
- four new Aboriginal Best Start projects
- extension of the existing mainstream and Aboriginal Best Start projects
- a report on the health status of recently arrived refugee children.

The importance of the early years – the four key evidence themes¹

The early childhood literature provides substantial evidence that:

- the early years are crucial in setting the stage for later life
- young children develop through their relationships with others
- children's development is shaped by the balance between risk and protective factors
- supporting families effectively requires a comprehensive, coordinated family-centred service system.

Setting the stage for later life

Brain research shows that the early years of development from conception to age six, particularly the first three years, provide the basis for the development of competence, coping and emotional skills that affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life. There is growing evidence that good nutrition, nurturing and responsive care-giving in these early years, combined with high quality early childhood development programs, can improve the long-term outcomes for all children's health, development, learning and wellbeing.

Developing through relationships with others

All young children's learning and development occurs in the context of their relationships with their caregivers. These early experiences form characteristic ways of relating to other people and of coping with the ebb and flow of emotions. These patterns of behaviour are not just psychological tendencies, but are actually built into the architecture and physiology of children's brains.

The balance between risk and protective factors

Children's development is shaped by the balance between factors known to place development at risk and those known to have protective properties. Children exposed to multiple risk factors become vulnerable to developmental problems of health, learning and wellbeing, whereas those exposed to protective factors are more likely to be resilient in the face of environmental adversities. These determinants of child development have an impact at all levels: family, neighbourhood, community and economy. To ensure that more children develop well, we need to reduce the factors that place them at risk and promote those that are protective. Among other things, this means building more child and family friendly communities.²

¹ Adapted from the *Municipal Early Years Framework 2005*

² A diagram of risk and protective factors with associated /protection of adverse outcomes can be found at www.dhs.vic.gov.au and the Centre for Community Child Health's publication, *A review of the early childhood literature* (Feb 2000) at website: www.rch.org.au/ccch²

Providing a comprehensive, coordinated family-centred service system

To achieve better outcomes for children and families, we need an integrated system of services that can respond to the emerging needs of children and families in local community settings. To become more effective, service systems need to adopt a family-centred approach to working with families, a partnership approach to working with communities, and a strength-based approach to policy and service development. Better outcomes are also achieved when services are comprehensive and inclusive.

The challenge is to adopt an ecological perspective, collectively addressing all of the factors that impact on child and family functioning, rather than continuing to provide separate services that each focus on a single factor or problem. To achieve a holistic, integrated system, we need to adopt an approach that is cross-sectoral, multilevel, and has strong local leadership.

This evidence can inform the development of early years services through planning, in partnership with the community and government, for early years services and activities that are:

- sufficient in number to meet the need
- high quality and developmentally appropriate
- across the range of education, care and health
- targeted at children at risk of long-term damage or disadvantage
- culturally appropriate
- aimed at minimising risk and strengthening protective factors
- comprehensive in nature
- strongly linked and coordinated across the universal, secondary and tertiary sectors
- able to foster participation
- family-friendly and adopt a family-centred approach to practice.

Key activities

International research and experience indicate that some key activities are essential elements of a comprehensive, inclusive, accessible and effective early years service system. These include:

- improving access to quality antenatal care
- improving support for parents to care for their children
- improving opportunities for good quality play, learning, child care, kindergarten and early education experiences for children, before school and during the first three years of school
- strengthening the key role of schools as a hub within communities and a natural focal point for the integrated provision of services to children and their families

- improving support for parents to strengthen their skills and capacity to promote the development and early learning of their children
- improving access by parents to adult literacy and numeracy education and other adult and further education and related services
- improving health care for both child and parent, including health information (for example, nutrition, immunisation, public health surveillance and primary health treatment)
- improving support for all children and families in the transition from preschool to school, with a focus on those with special needs
- improving outreach and home based services for those in most need
- improving the promotion of safe, nurturing and child-friendly community environments.

Policy context

The *Growing Victoria Together* policy (Victorian State Government, 2001, 2004) outlines the State Government's commitment to building cohesive communities and delivering high quality, accessible health and community services and high quality education and training for lifelong learning.

The *Children First* policy (Victorian State Government, 2002) highlights the need to link universal and secondary early childhood services to improve the early identification of children at risk and to improve outcomes for children and their families. This policy includes new ways to build, strengthen and connect services, including maternal and child health, maternity, early intervention, kindergarten, child care and family support services.

The *Joining the dots* report (Premier's Children's Advisory Committee, 2004) (the PCAC report) acknowledges and supports many of the current initiatives being undertaken within the early years area, including Municipal Early Years Plans, the *Future directions of the Victorian Maternal and Child Health Service*, children's centers and reform in the family services and child protection sectors.

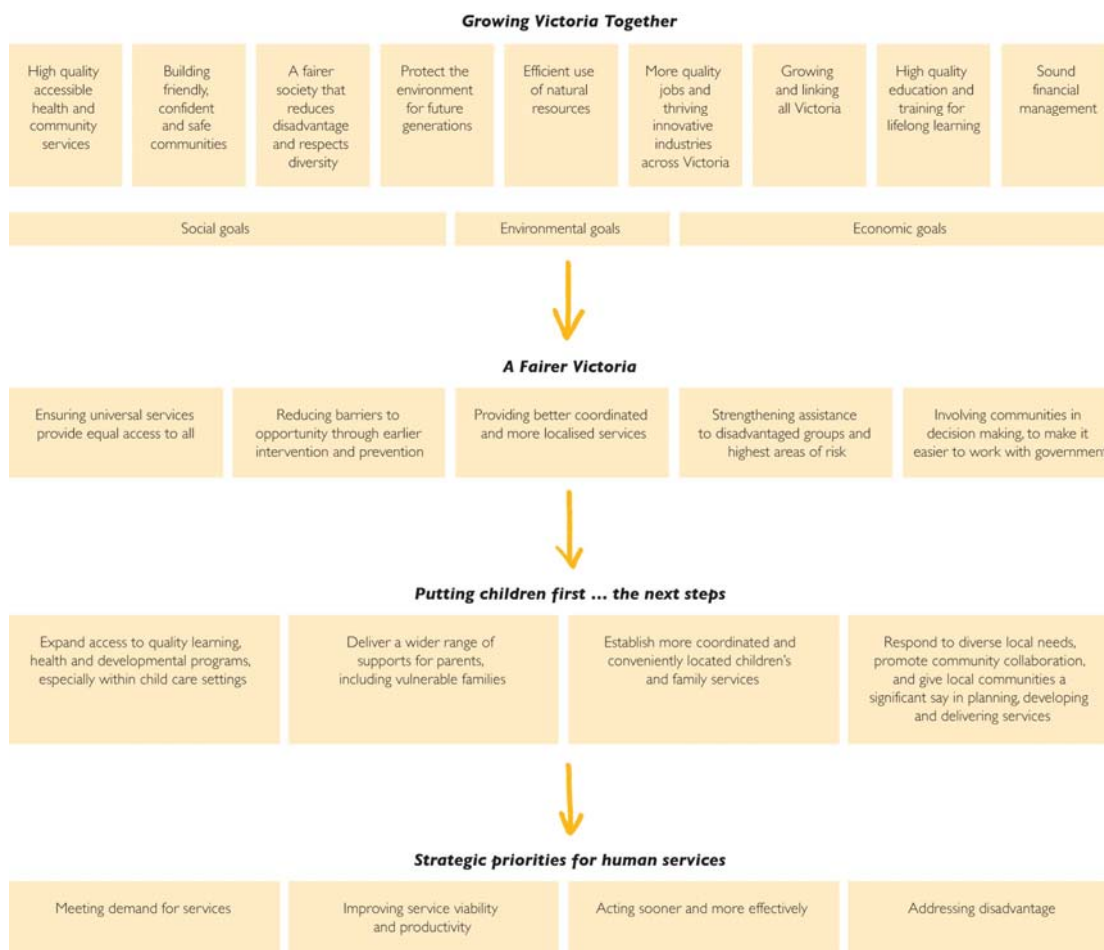
The government, in *Putting children first...the next steps* (Victorian State Government, 2004), its response to the PCAC report, endorsed the broad directions contained in *Joining the dots* and outlined in more detail its commitment to addressing the needs of children.

A Fairer Victoria (Victorian State Government, 2005) further outlines the State Government's commitment to improve access to vital services, reduce barriers to opportunity, and strengthen assistance for disadvantaged groups, people with disability and people with mental illnesses – thereby strengthening our community as a whole.

Giving children the best start in life is a key government strategy within *A Fairer Victoria*. The Victorian State Government acknowledges that the first four years are critical to the long-term health and development of children and their future chances. Seven key actions to give children the best start in life are identified in this policy.

These policy statements, together with the Department of Human Services *Strategic plan for human services 2005* provide the policy context for these guidelines. The policy context is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Policy context



In 2005, the Department of Human Services is developing a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to the provision of early childhood services through the development of a Plan for Victoria's Children. This plan will signal new directions in policy, including a commitment to service integration, improved coordination and greater local flexibility. The plan will:

- identify areas where improvements are needed, and the strategies to achieve this

- identify themes in the information collected for Municipal Early Years Plans
- identify best practice in local planning, community involvement, service delivery and the transition to school, and ways in which the State Government can support this
- identify gaps in current services and the best ways to fill these
- define outcomes for Victoria's children and the best ways to measure these
- identify research and evaluation priorities.

Partnership with local government

One of the key changes to policies and services identified by the government in its response to the PCAC report³ was 'working closer with local government...by strengthening the role of Municipal Early Years Plans'.

A Municipal Early Years Plan is a local area plan designed to provide a strategic direction for the development and coordination of education, care and health programs, activities and other local developments that impact on children and their families.

These plans have been designed to enable local governments to work in partnership with the community across their defined roles in early years service/facility provision, planning, advocacy and community building.

While the Municipal Early Years Plans provide a strategic framework for the planning and provision of services for children and their families, the Best Start action plan seeks to introduce service level changes to improve outcomes for children. The Best Start action plan is focused on achieving change in the Best Start indicators, whereas Municipal Early Years Plans are likely to cover broader domains.

Given the importance of local government as an essential partner of Best Start, the Municipal Early Years Plan, which now exists in all municipalities, should provide a base for the Best Start partnership. In particular, the Best Start partnership will be able to draw from and build on the Municipal Early Years Plan and, where appropriate:

- extend the data mapping and analysis to include Best Start indicator and subsidiary aims data
- update the environmental scan with a focus on vulnerable families and/or neighbourhoods
- hold additional consultations to fill gaps in knowledge related to the Best Start initiative
- support and/or complement planning, coordination and community building.

³ Victorian Government, Putting Children First...the next steps, 2004

Linking to other initiatives: place-based and planning frameworks

To make a lasting difference, Best Start projects must fit strategically into the wider landscape of services for young children and their families. A crucial component of local planning is to use other local activity that will add strength to the Best Start partnership and avoid duplication of effort. This means using and building upon existing services and developing coordinated and integrated approaches with other relevant initiatives. See Appendix 1 for a detailed discussion of some of these initiatives.

The Best Start approach

The Best Start approach is to strengthen the local capacity of parents, families and communities and early years services to better provide for the needs of **all** young children and their families. This is achieved by:

- listening to parent and family knowledge and expectations
- the inclusion of vulnerable children and families in early years services
- the inclusion of Aboriginal children and their families
- ensuring services are inclusive of culturally diverse children and families
- mobilising community interest, resources and infrastructure to create child-friendly communities
- translating early childhood evidence into practice
- coordinating and integrating existing services
- introducing innovative changes to services, based on evidence
- developing strong cross-sectoral local partnerships.

Listening to parent and family knowledge and expectations

As the primary carers for children, parents and family members, know their children the best. As users of universal early years services, parents and families also have unique knowledge about how they can best be supported to help them care for their children. This knowledge derives from personal experience, awareness of the needs of other families through normal social discourse, and everyday experience from living within a community. This knowledge is critical in the planning and provision of services that are meaningful, relevant and easier for parents to access.

While many members of the Best Start partnership may be parents, the inclusion of parents from within Best Start sites is likely to increase sensitivity to the needs of and pressures faced by local families.

For example: A number of Best Start sites have established parent committees or involved parents in local working groups to advise on aspects of the Best Start Action Plan.

Engaging vulnerable children and families with early years services

Engagement requires recognition of the diversity of family structures and beliefs about children and parenting roles. A range of strategies and tailored activities has proven to be more successful in meeting these differing needs.

A comprehensive response to meet the needs of all children within a community requires

processes that enable parents-to-be, mothers and fathers or partners, grandparents, young mothers, parents with drug and alcohol misuse, parents with mental illness and disability, and parents who do not speak English, to feel that services have been designed for and are relevant to them. Services need to be warm and welcoming and staff need to be able to put their own values system to one side. It is well known that engagement with a service is largely reflective of the relationship developed between a worker and the client.

Engaging with families who are most marginalised, and often with multiple problems, requires commitment and specific action. The Inclusion Framework identified in the Breaking Cycles, Building Futures report outlines four principles to facilitate the engagement of universal services by vulnerable families⁴:

- overcoming practical and structural barriers
- building positive relationships
- cultural sensitivity and value for effort
- service coordination and linkages.

***For example:** Cross-sectoral family-centred practice, locally developed training for all early years staff, has been an effective strategy to ensure a common approach across all local early years services to engage vulnerable families*

Engaging Aboriginal children and their families

The Victorian Aboriginal community comprises a number of communities and extended family networks. It is widely acknowledged that past practices have not always had a positive effect on Aboriginal people. Current health and welfare policies acknowledge the impact of past policies and continue to work collaboratively for a better future. Best Start promotes collaborative practice.

The *Aboriginal Best Start status report* adds to a body of knowledge that reinforces the importance Aboriginal people place on their children. Aboriginal people view their children as critical to their future and consider improving their children's health and education outcomes as crucial. Aboriginal people want to provide leadership and direction to health, welfare and education services to provide a best start in life for their children.

The Aboriginal Best Start projects have been established to ensure that local Aboriginal communities and organisations are given every possible opportunity to influence outcomes for their children and families. Many Aboriginal children experience multiple factors that place their health wellbeing and psychosocial development at risk. These projects are designed to empower communities and families and develop broad cross-sectoral partnerships across all early years services to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families.

Guiding all projects will be the Best Start evidence base and the *Aboriginal Best Start status*

⁴ Department of Human Services, Breaking Cycles, Building Futures, 2005

report that brings together Aboriginal cultural beliefs, knowledge about the key elements of child development and the factors that impact on Aboriginal children reaching their full potential. (*Aboriginal Best Start status report 2004*, www.beststart.vic.gov.au).

It is also important that Aboriginal children are a priority population group in **all** Best Start projects.

Mainstream services play a key role in the provision of health, education and welfare services to Aboriginal children and families. Community consultation identified a number of barriers to Aboriginal families accessing universal early years services, including:

- a mistrust of government services
- a lack of cultural awareness and an insensitivity to Aboriginal people by services and staff
- poor promotion of available services
- poor availability of services resulting from limited opening times
- limited physical access due to factors such as poor public transport.

For example: *Creating opportunities for Elders and local Aboriginal parents to be represented on the Best Start partnerships, either directly or in a specific sub-committee, have been successful strategies used by Best Start sites to promote the engagement of Aboriginal children and families.*

Ensuring services are inclusive of culturally diverse children and families

A population rich in cultures and languages provides enormous social and economic benefits to Victoria. Victoria's cultural diversity also provides a significant challenge for the Office for Children to ensure that its service system is culturally inclusive, respectful and sensitive to all children and their families.

Consistent with a universal population-based preventative approach, each Best Start project needs to develop strategies to engage and support culturally diverse communities both within the partnership and within the universal service system. These strategies should include engaging representatives onto a Best Start partnership and encouraging participation at all stages of Best Start activity. For further information, see the *Cultural diversity guide: Multicultural Strategy* (Department of Human Services, 2004).

Community groups and leaders of ethno-specific organisations, including newly arrived immigrants or refugees, will be a key point of contact for engaging these members of communities within the project.

For example: *The use of bilingual workers or volunteers is one way that has proven to be successful in engaging with different cultural groups.*

Mobilising community interest, resources and infrastructure to create child-friendly communities

Child and family friendly communities are where the needs of children and their families are embedded into the local fabric of the community, from physical and social infrastructure to business investment and educational opportunities.

Universal early childhood and early education services, together with parents, families and community supports that sustain them, have distinct geographic and cultural profiles. Local partnerships that understand and can account for this diversity are an essential ingredient to the success of Best Start.

A community that is mobilised is likely to be proactive about seeking better outcomes for their children and to join together to ensure that opportunities are acted upon. Spaces previously dedicated to a singular use can be used for a variety of child and family friendly activities, such as playgroups in schools. New early years partnerships have taken responsibility for identifying and implementing these opportunities in Best Start.

***For example:** Best Start partnerships have been successful in submitting for additional resources from both state and Commonwealth initiatives. They have advocated for the implementation of new programs (such as Kids Go For Your Life and Smiles for Miles, in their areas, and have engaged other community-based initiatives⁵ (such as Neighbourhood Renewal and Family Support Innovation Projects), local businesses and philanthropic organisations.*

Translating the early childhood evidence into practice

Using evidence to improve outcomes for children is a key requirement of the Best Start project. The evidence base can be used to determine what works and why and to translate those learnings into local solutions.

The challenge is to ensure that partnerships develop strategies that are evidence-based, measurable and focused on improving outcomes for children.

The *Best Start evidence base report* provides an overview of the importance of early childhood experiences that are known to be associated with a range of outcomes for children. The full report and a summary of the evidence base are both available at www.beststart.vic.gov.au

The Strategies for Gain report provides the evidence on strategies to improve the health and wellbeing of Victorian children provides direction on successful strategies for improving children's health, development, learning and wellbeing.

***For example:** Breastfeeding. A multidimensional project on breastfeeding used a range of strategies to improve breastfeeding rates. The project included an 'experts forum', community and professional education, a community strategy to develop a map of available breastfeeding*

⁵ Appendix 1 provides more details on these initiatives.

locations, and professional development strategies targeted to early years services staff to improve the promotion and support given to women breastfeeding.

Coordinating and integrating existing services

Best Start partnerships will make a difference to child health, development, learning and wellbeing through changes to the delivery of existing early years services, strengthening the links between those services, and integrating services where possible. These changes are likely to lead to a more sustainable coordination and provision of care and support for all children and parents, irrespective of income, ethnic background, ability or geographic location.

While the design and content of an effective early years system will vary, this system must be coordinated. The challenge is to adopt a perspective that collectively addresses all of the factors that impact upon child and family functioning, rather than continuing to provide separate services that each focus on a single factor or problem and exacerbate the barriers to accessing these.

***For example:** Capital funding for children's centres is providing the scope for a range of early childhood services to be located under one roof, thus improving capacity for enhanced service integration. However, much can also be achieved by local services building collaborative and inclusive practices within the existing service infrastructure.*

Introducing innovative changes to services, based on evidence

Innovation is about ideas and the transformation of those ideas into outcomes. It often results in changes to culture and practice to achieve this.

Best Start sites will have access to the most up-to-date evidence of strategies most likely to impact on the priority indicators. The challenge for partnerships will be to develop innovative approaches to implementing these strategies in local communities.

Innovation is the opposite of doing more of the same.

***For example:** The use of bilingual workers, Aboriginal health workers and early childhood workers alongside other service professionals is considered an innovative response to engaging and supporting more vulnerable families.*

Developing strong cross-sectoral local partnerships

The basis for the success of Best Start projects is partnership development. Partnerships are the key factor leading to improvements in service cooperation and collaboration across early years services. Developing the trust of partners, exchange of information and joint planning are crucial to partnership success. Partnerships provide strong early years leadership, drive the change process and improve service delivery in local areas.

For example: *There have been considerable achievements in the development of partnerships. They have often been extremely broad and included parents, community organisations, health care services, police, primary school principals and regional education officers. The benefits of partnerships have improved the culture of collaboration across the entire service system, 'The development of collaborative practices has been one of the greatest successes' and 'has become a way of life on any project, we would now always consider who our partners are, and how we can engage them' (Wellington Best Start partner)*

The Best Start measures of improvement

Best Start is focused on achieving significant improvements in outcomes for all children. Positive impacts will be felt throughout a child's life into adulthood and across generations as today's children become parents in the future.

Some important international research studies show that the longer term outcomes that a 'best start' in early childhood can achieve across a population include:

- greater engagement with positive education experiences
- improved retention and performance at school
- improved satisfaction in employment
- better physical and mental health with reduced use of specialist health services, more positive social experiences
- reduced rates of crime and imprisonment
- more cohesive and supportive communities better able to prevent harm and abuse of young children and hence break destructive cycles.⁶

Indicators are used to monitor and measure outcomes.

Partnerships are expected to consider all of the Best Start indicators in developing their community profile and community map. However, they will be required to focus on four priority indicators in their action plan with at least one from each of the three domains outlined below. Partnerships are required to then use the selected indicators as the basis for monitoring and measuring changes over time. The indicators have been chosen as the Best Start measures because they are:

- known to have a strong evidence base linking them to improved health, development, learning and wellbeing outcomes for children
- collected regularly through existing data processes
- susceptible to change within the short to medium term
- provide consistent measurement across diverse project sites.

The indicators are categorised under the following domains:

- Health and wellbeing
- Learning and Development

⁶ Shonkoff, JP & Phillips, DA (Eds.) (2000). *From neurons to neighbourhoods: the science of early childhood development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

- Safety.

In addition, the Office for Children is developing the capacity to systematically monitor and report on important aspects of the safety, health, development, learning and wellbeing of children and adolescents in Victoria. The Office for Children is developing a child health and wellbeing population survey, which will complement the Victorian Population Health Survey and provide baseline and ongoing data for monitoring child outcomes. During 2006 a modified survey designed to measure early childhood outcomes at a local government level within Best Start areas will be implemented. Data from the Best Start surveys will be available for local government agencies to use for policy development, program planning and evaluation.

Best Start outcomes and indicators

Health and wellbeing

Increased rate of breastfeeding
 Decreased rate of women smoking during pregnancy⁷
 Decreased rate of children exposed to tobacco smoke in the home⁸
 Increased rates of immunisation
 Increased attendance at Maternal and Child Health
 Increased rate of children who are protected from summer sun⁹
 Increased rate of children who participate in physical activity¹⁰
 Proportion of children who clean their teeth at least twice a day¹¹

Learning and Development

Increased rate of parents reading to their children
 Increased participation in kindergarten
 Reduced absences from primary school
 Improved reading, writing and numeracy

Safety

Decreased rate of re-notifications to child protection
 Decreased rate of unintentional injury¹²
 Proportion of children whose parents report high levels of social support¹³

Indicator data is collected through statewide surveys, individual services and local sites.

⁷ This data is not readily available, however smoking in pregnancy and reducing the impact tobacco is a key DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES strategy. This strategy will support the inclusion of the indicator.

⁸ The indicator will be measured every three years by the Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing CATI survey.

⁹ Measured by the Victorian Child Health and Wellbeing CATI Survey

¹⁰ As Above

¹¹ As above

¹² As above

¹³ As Above

Evaluation

The Office for Children is committed to adopting evidence-based approaches to improve the outcomes for young children and their families. The practical use of evidence helps to ensure informed decision making by partnerships, services and practitioners for the selection of strategies used to achieve the outcomes within the Best Start local projects.

Evaluation plays a significant role in identifying the strengths and successful characteristics of projects that can be duplicated and extended into other early years planning and service delivery settings.

The current Best Start evaluation will be completed in June 2006. A complementary evaluation framework that builds on the existing evaluation will be developed. All new Best Start sites will be required to participate in this evaluation and incorporate the evaluation activities into their action plans.

Section 2

Implementing local Best Start projects

This section provides context and guidance for the implementation of the local Best Start projects including:

- establishing partnerships
- developing and implementing action plans
- monitoring and reporting
- evaluation
- sustaining change.

Key activities within projects

Each Best Start project will be unique - designed to meet local needs. However, six key activities will be undertaken in all project sites. These activities are illustrated below.

Best Start partnerships

International experience shows, and the Best Start evaluation confirms, that a strong and effective partnership platform is essential for effective planning and is an indicator of success.

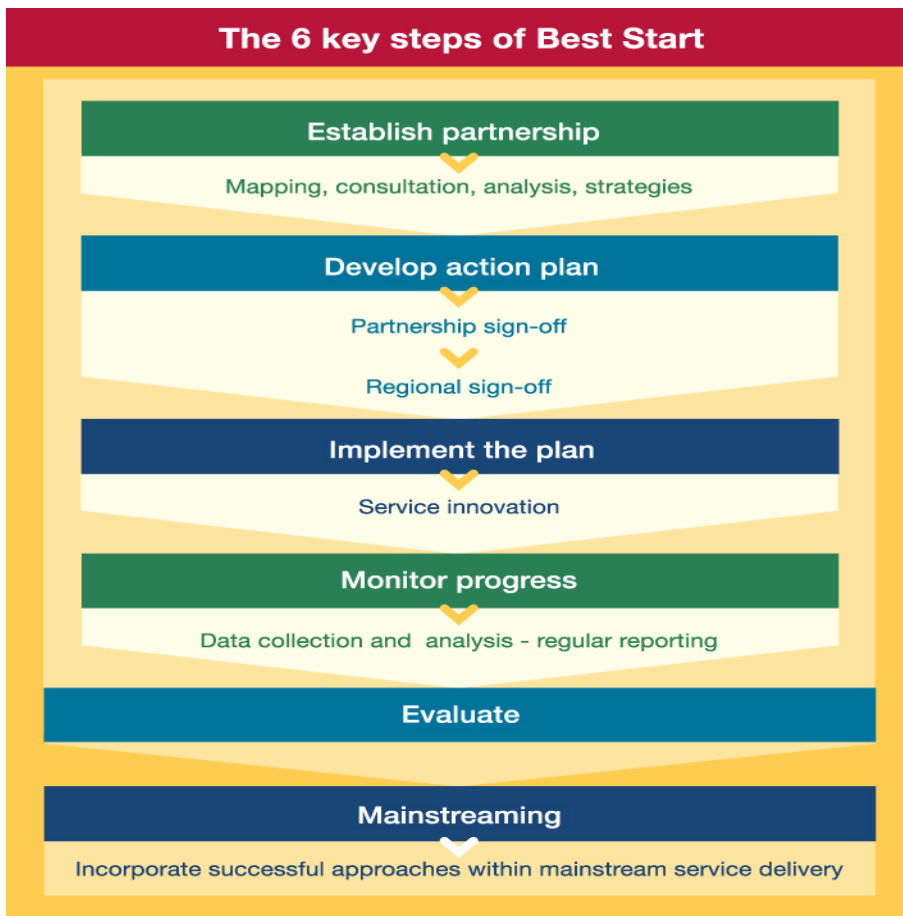
Local partnerships are the cornerstone of the Best Start approach. Many benefits are derived from forming broad partnerships that bring together expertise and experience in child rearing, early years service delivery, local planning and good practice. This expertise and experience that can be used to develop innovative and collaborative responses to improve outcomes for children and their families.

Partnership responsibilities

The Best Start partnership has responsibility for overseeing all phases of the project. The partnership will be the key decision making body that guides and manages the project. This partnership will be charged with the responsibility for:

- developing a shared and comprehensive understanding of the needs of all children through a rigorous community mapping process
- developing and implementing a plan for action to address identified areas of concern
- planning the implementation of the action plan
- monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of these approaches at the local level.

Figure 2 The six key steps of Best Start



The Best Start partnership, and its individual members, is expected to lead the way in cultural change, service coordination and integration. Early indications from the evaluation of Best Start are that service cooperation and collaboration has been effective in the Best Start partnerships.

Best Start partnerships are responsible for:

- ensuring strong and visionary leadership
- actively driving planning and integration
- promoting and encouraging a shared responsibility for all children within their local area
- developing a strong commitment and responsibility for improved outcomes for children.

The Best Start partnerships will:

- engage key stakeholders (parents, local government, health and education services and community organisations) in new partnerships, including with government, that focus on improving outcomes for young children
- bring together local knowledge of parents, services and professional expertise with evidence-based practice and use the Best Start approach to plan, deliver and evaluate innovative early years service responses
- strengthen linkages between universal (primary) and specialist services for vulnerable children, their parents and those families with multiple and complex needs
- mobilise community resources that can complement and support early years service innovation
- work towards clearly understood outcomes that improve the life chances of children and build a culture of ongoing service evaluation into everyday service provision within and across services
- incorporate successful strategies, programs and service models into mainstream service provision that will lead to systemic change in service delivery.

Establishing a Best Start partnership

The partnership will include representatives of local parents, providers of services for young children and their families, the tiers of government, and other key groups who are involved in, and can impact upon, the day to day lives of young children and their families within a community. It is important to make sure that parents and community representatives have the opportunity to contribute to all aspects of decision making from the early stages of the project's development.

Best Start partnerships should build on existing early years partnerships, such as those developed through Municipal Early Years Plans. They should ideally be embedded within other local planning structures and processes to ensure better integration and sustainability of change beyond the life of the project.

Existing early years services may form the core partnership with additional representation from other essential partners including parents, local government and education services.

The Department of Human Services recognises the importance of well functioning partnerships. To this end, partnerships will be supported to undertake training to develop the partnerships, understand the governance requirements of the partnerships, and to assist with the strategic planning requirements. The theory of change management will also be incorporated into this training.

Best Start partners

The Best Start partnership must include representation of six essential partner groups who will work together with regional departments of Human Services and Education and Training staff in developing and implementing action plans. These essential partner groups include are:

- parents/Elders
- local government
- health services
- education services
- family and community support services¹⁴
- community organisations (such as sport and recreation clubs, advocacy groups, peak organisations).

It is also expected that each partnership will include additional membership reflective of local needs and services. The partnership must be inclusive of all those providing for young children in their catchment, including Aboriginal children and families, disadvantaged children and families, families of young children with a disability, and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The departments of Human Services and Education and Training will nominate regional representatives to participate in the partnership and to enhance collaboration with government as a key stakeholder.

Examples of services and organisations with an interest in children are provided in Appendix 2.

The fund holder and the facilitating partner

Each Best Start partnership will appoint from its membership a fund holder and a facilitating partner.

The fund holder

The fund holder will be one of the essential partners and be an incorporated body able to demonstrate financial viability. The fund holder may also be the facilitating partner.

The facilitating partner

The facilitating partner may also be the fund holder partner. The facilitating partner has responsibility for driving the strategic planning and project accountability components of the project. The employment and management of the community facilitator is the responsibility of this partner. It is also expected this partner will be a strong 'early years champion' and be able to communicate with and motivate other partners and community members to understand the importance of the early years evidence base and gain support for the redesign of the early years service system.

[Section 3 Project governance](#) contains further information on the role and requirements of fund

¹⁴ In particular the community intake service established within Family Support Innovation Projects

holders and facilitating partners.

Formalising the partnership

The partnership will be formalised through the development and signing of a partnership agreement designed by the partnership. Formalising the partnership will be a collaborative endeavour between parents, participating agencies and government at the local level.

The formal sign-off of the Best Start partnership will occur when agreement has been reached that the membership is representative of key stakeholders within the community, including Aboriginal networks and ethnic organisations.

It is also understood that developing legitimate and credible ways of including the views and experiences of the most marginalised parents in planning and evaluation will take time and will require particular strategies that may mean their initial involvement in the partnership is limited to the consultative processes.¹⁵

Documented strategies that identify the ways the partnership membership plans to engage with these families over time will be adequate for partnership sign off.

The Best Start partnership is likely to evolve over time to reflect local commitment and strategic directions of the Best Start project.

Early partnership structures may not continue to be relevant throughout the life of the project. For example, a core group of partners may evolve into a steering group, with working groups focusing on specific actions. It is crucial that parents are engaged in the partnership in some form. Parents may also wish to form a sub-group of the partnership.

The partnership agreement

The partnership agreement will include:

- details of fund holder and facilitating partner
- signatures of essential partners (if parent representatives have not been identified, a strategy for including parents must be included)
- a vision/aims/objectives of the partnership consistent with the aims of Best Start
- partnership accountability mechanisms
- decision making protocols/principles
- conflict resolution and grievance procedures
- communication protocols/principles

¹⁵ The experiences of the current Best Start sites and the evaluation of Mini Sure Start in England suggests that engagement with parents does take time to build trust and confidence, but parents can be empowered through this process.

- confidentiality protocols/principles.

Figure 3 Formalising the partnership



Partnership sign off

The partnership agreement is required to be formally signed off by the regional directors of the departments of Human Services and Education and Training. This is an acknowledgement of the important role of the partnership and demonstrates the State Government's commitment to the Best Start partnership. It also ensures the representation of key community stakeholders, and that appropriate accountability structures are in place

This formal sign off represents three key commitments:

- Government endorsement of the partnership, reflecting the key early years stakeholders in the selected site, and acknowledgement that the identified partnership will guide and direct Best Start activity
- Government endorsement of the agency(ies) nominated as the facilitating partner and the fund holder with whom Government will contract and to whom Best Start funding will be provided
- Regional commitment by both departments to support and participate in the partnership.

Role of the partnership

Partnerships will develop an action plan that is based on a comprehensive service mapping, consultation and needs analysis process described in this document.

The partnership will monitor the implementation of the action plan and review and update it. Regular progress reports will be submitted to the Regional Office of the departments of Human Services and Education and Training.

The partnership will work towards:

- promoting a strong, coordinated and integrated universal early years service platform and propose service enhancements if key elements are missing
- instigating innovative responses to locally identified needs through reorienting existing services or changing the way these services work together
- ensuring the universal early years service system is inclusive of all children and their families
- identifying needs of different children/family cohorts in a community and assessing whether some groups are not adequately supported by the existing early childhood services or have marginal links to support networks – and developing strategies to address those needs
- providing active outreach and service innovation to engage at risk and/or disengaged children and families within universal services
- using and enhancing existing support structures, including networks of schools, to model outreach and joined-up approaches to support children and their families

- providing more accessible, integrated support for at risk children and families within the universal service platform, including schools
- committing to shared health, education and social outcomes that the community is able to monitor (for example, breastfeeding rates, immunisation rates, preschool and school attendance rates, literacy and numeracy development, rates of child protection re-notification)
- identifying children's learning needs on entry to school and ongoing monitoring and assessment of learning in the first three years of school.

The Best Start action plan

The Best Start action plan is central to the development of the project and critical to its success.

The action plan will be an operational document that drives the work of the project and forms the agreement between partnership members and government about what will constitute Best Start activities, the rationale underpinning the choice of these activities, and how Best Start is expected to positively impact on the Best Start indicators.

Once agreed, the partnership will work towards implementing the plan. The plan will also form the basis for monitoring and reporting and will be the focus of the evaluation.

Developing an action plan

A comprehensive and inclusive planning process that engages with all aspects of community life involving young children and their parents and families (including those who are marginalised or disadvantaged and not currently using services) and local early years services is required. Consideration should be given to adopting the actions contained within the Municipal Early Years Plan where they are consistent with the aims and indicators of Best Start.

Documenting the action plan

The Best Start action plan is a significant piece of work and requires sign-off by all partnership members. It forms the basis for action and the justification for project expenditure. The plan becomes the documentation of the agreed project activities between government and the other partnership members.

The Best Start action plan will contain a comprehensive profile of the population of all young children and their families living within the project catchment collected through the process described above, the strategies that will be trialled to improve outcomes using local community infrastructure and services and local evaluation activities.

The action plan will be:

- built upon the local vision within the community about what can be achieved for parents-to-be, young children and their families through Best Start
- unique and tailored to address local needs
- simply and clearly written so that community members can understand their content and intent
- identify the intended impact on outcomes for children.

It is important that the plan captures the vision of the partnership. The description of the Best Start location should be realistic but non-stigmatising, stating the strengths and identified issues of the area in a way that people will recognise and accept. It should include a vision of

how the project will impact on the lives of young children and their families.

Plans must ensure inclusion of children and families from Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse groups and minority groups within the community, such as children with additional needs and newly arrived immigrants and refugees. The plan should explain how the local project will contribute to addressing the needs of these groups as well as 'hard to reach groups' identified through the mapping and assessment process.

Plans must also show how and why the partnerships have prioritised the selected indicators, and provide a brief rationale for those priorities. The strategies must be evidence-based and measurable either through the Best Start indicators or locally collected data.

Action plans must be realistic. Priority action areas should be limited and focus on outcome areas that the partnership is confident they can manage.

The six steps of an action plan

Appendix 3 contains a breakdown of the contents of the action plan.

Each partnership should follow six steps to develop the action plan, much of which will be undertaken at the same time. The overview is contained in Figure 4.

1. Mapping the local community

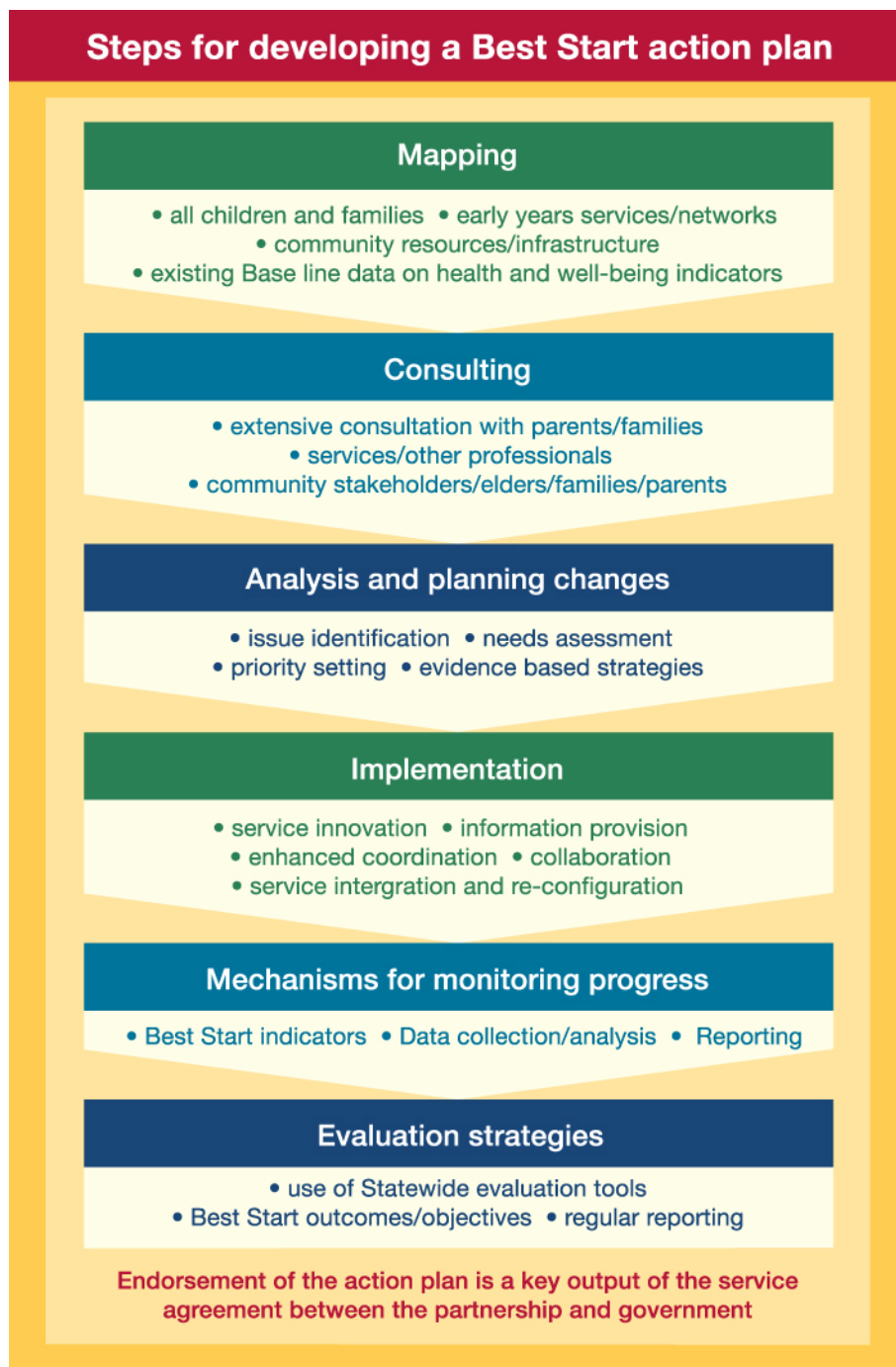
The aim of the mapping process is to develop a shared and comprehensive understanding of the profile of the community in the chosen site (typically a local government area).

Partners must be willing to share information and data. Regional Department of Education and Training and Department of Human Services officers and local government can assist with this task and will be able to draw on information from other planning exercises as well as early information collected within the project.

Building a number of 'maps' of the community and the location may be a worthwhile way of presenting information in a more easily understood format than endless lists and tables.

Mapping of children and families should include population intensity, birth rates across the area, numbers and location of children and families, ethnicity, Aboriginality, socio-demographic profiling, including measures of disadvantage. Mapping the catchment and identifying community cohorts against those risk factors that are known to be associated with poor outcomes provides important information about where the greatest areas of unmet need for support and services may lie.

Figure 4 Steps for developing a Best Start action plan



Mapping of community resources and infrastructure may include the location of roads, public housing, lighting, transport routes and timetables and their proximity in relation to services. Infrastructure would include ovals and playgrounds, facilities such as public buildings and halls that could be used by families and young children. Resources will include local networks, neighbourhood houses, schools, sport and recreation clubs, libraries and so on.

Mapping of services may include the type and capacity of early years services and programs provided for parents-to-be, young children and their families; location of service outlets, including sessional work and outreach, and times of operation. Analysing service administration data will identify who is currently using services and who is not. Local knowledge about transient populations and minority and marginalised groups will add valuable information that can only be known at the community level. The profile of service use across the catchment should be clear. This information can be incorporated into a number of site maps for parents and other community members to view.

Mapping can also include identifying ways of linking with other relevant initiatives and programs such as Municipal Early Years Plans, Communities for Children, Neighbourhood Renewal, Primary Care Partnerships, Community Building, Family Support Innovation Projects, Safe Start and the Victorian Rural Human Services Strategy (see Appendix 1 for more information).

2. Consulting the local community:

Many communities have a range of initiatives requiring community consultation. It is important that consultations are coordinated and information is shared with local organisations to inform those initiatives. This will assist community engagement and avoid duplication of effort. The Best Start action plan should use information gained from previous consultations where relevant.

Consultation with parents and the broader community about what services they need, how they want them delivered and how well they are meeting their expectations and needs is essential. Early engagement in this mapping process provides an important opportunity for including parents in a non-threatening fact-finding activity and seeking their involvement in the partnership and local early years activities.

Seeking the views of parents-to-be and parents of young children will be necessary to establish the level of satisfaction with existing services for families with young children. Surveys or focus groups are ways of collecting such data. Programs such as Neighbourhood Renewal in Victoria and Sure Start in the United Kingdom have conducted street surveys which provided valuable information about parents' satisfaction with early years services and what they would like in the future. Some municipalities are already surveying residents about their satisfaction with early years services. This information can help in planning the project. Any survey, however, should be representative of all parents with young children living in the Best Start project area.

Consultations need to be tailored to the needs of particular groups in the community, including young mothers, those who have additional burdens of illness including mental illness and problematic drug use or disability, those from non-English communities and minority ethnic groups, and Aboriginal families and communities.

3. Analysing and planning changes

International programs have shown that it is important to respond to some of the issues or concerns identified through this early consultation as soon as possible. Responding to some concerns with changes or new activities that can be delivered quickly and with little preparatory work, but facilitate improved access, have been noted to keep parents engaged and to raise the interest of communities.

Using the advice from parents and information collected to date, partnerships should identify at least one immediate service improvement that they can undertake quickly while the plan is being finalised. These changes will vary from one site to another, depending on the early needs that emerge through consultations, the opportunities presented by other initiatives and projects, and the sort of existing networks and resources that can be called upon in the area.

These early changes should be practical and encourage greater parental involvement.

Reshaping existing services

Best Start seeks to achieve significant and sustainable changes in the way early years services are provided. The funding is not sufficient to establish and implement new program initiatives. Reshaping services will be achieved by:

- better coordination and linkage between services
- preventing duplication across programs
- developing more effective service models for reaching those parents not currently using services and more innovative ways of undertaking early years work within and across sectors
- bringing together services and programs in new ways to ensure maximum use of the extensive and diverse expertise that exists across these services.

The information obtained from the mapping and consultation activities, combined with analysis of current service provision and baseline indicator data, will highlight opportunities for more strategic and coordinated use of local resources and services.

The partnership will identify ways to reshape or reorient existing services in line with the needs of parents, focusing on prevention and early intervention, responding to emergent problems and making best use of evidence about what works. The opportunity for service innovation is significant. The four dimensions of service innovation – flexible relationships, agreed processes, practice innovation and integrated service provision - build on each other, with the latter being viewed as most able to address high and complex needs.

Flexible relationships

Greater responsiveness can be achieved at the local level through changes to practices within and between existing services, and through enhancing existing relationships between early years service providers. Examples include joint professional development and forums, orientation of new staff across services, and agreed protocols for working together.

Agreed processes

Agreed process reflects a commitment to changes to the structure and organisation of work practices within and between organisations to better link and coordinate services and improve access and responsiveness. Examples include protocols and agreements about ways of services working together.

Practice innovation

Practice innovation would include substantial changes in the way that services are organised and delivered, in order to develop a more coordinated, comprehensive, inclusive and efficient service platform that is better able to respond to local needs.

Integrated services

Integration requires:

- a supportive governance structure
- commitment from all services involved
- sound planning prior to, during and after integration
- innovative service design that brings together disparate program guidelines and reporting requirements
- professional multidisciplinary collaboration and, in some instances, joint service delivery.

While not essential for the integration of services, co-location may be considered an important step towards service integration.

The Best Start partnership may provide the leadership to develop a more integrated early years service system. However, care should be taken to ensure that the Best Start Action plan balances the effort required to achieve service integration with the need to impact on the Best Start indicators over the short to medium term.

To assist with the development of good practice and innovative service models, a review of programs for which there is supporting evidence can be found on the Best Start website: www.beststart.vic.gov.au ([Best Start: Effective Intervention Programs: Examples of Effective Interventions, Programs and Service Models](http://www.beststart.vic.gov.au)).

Timing for action plans

In recognition of the importance of getting planning right and inclusive of the diversity of view within a community, the final Action Plan is required to be submitted to the Department of Human Services within six months of partnership sign off.

The Best Start Regional Project Officer and other regional Department of Human Services and Department of Education and Training staff are available to assist a partnership with the development of their plan.

4 Implementing the action plan

Following the sign off of the action plan by the regional directors for Department of Education and Training and Department of Human Services, the priority for the partnership is implementation according to the agreed reporting regime and targets. The regional office will send a copy of the action plan to the Minister for Children and the Executive Director, Office for Children, for information.

Implementation of the action plan requires commitment from partners and good change management strategies within and between organisations. Implementation of service innovation will be in the hands of staff across multiple sectors who may not have been directly involved in partnership discussions.

Communication strategies will need to be developed to ensure clear and accurate flow of information and updates on progress.

It is expected that the implementation of the plan will provide important information about whether the approaches identified are operationally effective and feasible or whether they require modification.

Modifications to strategies and innovations in response to information emerging from monitoring processes are an important part of the quality feedback loop. However, any modifications to the plan must be considered and agreed by the partnership as a whole.

5. Establishing mechanisms for monitoring progress and measuring outcomes

While there are broad accountability requirements for Best Start, the action plan must detail how the implementation of each action will be monitored and how the intended outcomes will be measured. Partnerships will be expected to document the management of the project, monitoring and evaluation of the agreed actions and strategies identified within the plan, and to account for expenditure consistent with the Department of Human Services contracting requirements.

Monitoring systems need to be in place from the beginning to track expenditure of funds, progress in implementation of the plan and early changes in Best Start indicators and project outcomes.

Agreement to the establishment of suitable processes and mechanisms for data collection and monitoring and reporting against agreed indicators over the duration of the project is a requirement of participation. The Department of Human Services will support the collation of the statewide indicator data and distribute this periodically to Best Start sites.

The regional staff will forward monitoring information to the Best Start project team in central office.

Setting up monitoring systems

Best Start brings together many partners to deliver a wide range of services and activities. It is expected that service partners will have good administrative data collection processes for organisation-specific activities. The partnership will, however, need to determine the most appropriate way of bringing together this information so that the Best Start indicators and progress towards locally determined priorities can be measured.

While most of this information will be at the population level, it is recognised that in some settings, particularly small rural towns, individual children and families could potentially become more identifiable through inference from population data.

Local protocols and codes of practice on data sharing, data protection, privacy, confidentiality and informed parental consent will need to be identified and addressed at the early stage of setting up monitoring processes. When deciding what data to collect additional to the Best Start indicators, partnerships will need to fully justify the purpose of collecting such information, taking into account the *Information Privacy Act Year?*. All data collected for the purposes of Best Start activity must be anonymous.

Note: *No records or information about individual children or parents should be kept by the partnership.*

Parents' informed consent must always be obtained as part of the community consultation process. This means that parents fully understand that no individually identifiable information about them or their children will be held by the partnership.

Information will need to be kept about the project itself and reports written accordingly. Setting up these information processes is likely to require some additional investment of resources though the project.

Local protocols covering these areas will need to be developed, agreed and implemented. Partner agencies should be willing to share basic data on children and their families with the Best Start project as long as they are assured that such information will not jeopardise anonymity, that it will be securely stored and there will be no access to identifiable records. Departmental officers can provide advice and support regarding data collection.

Review

The partnership may wish to alter the activities and redirect funds as a result of monitoring project activity. Successful activities may be expanded and ineffective activity discontinued. All changes that alter the financial arrangements in the action plan must include discussions with the regional officer, and must be documented in writing and signed by partnership members.

A formal review and update of the Best Start action plan is required annually. The revised action plan should be forwarded to the regional officers for endorsement together with an annual progress report.

The annual project report will outline:

- progress towards the Best Start indicators as measures of improved outcomes for children,

families and communities

- the extent to which the agreed activities have been achieved against their milestones, including improvements in the engagement of vulnerable children and their families who were previously not accessing the service
- project management activities, including the achievement of key milestones, expenditure of funding and the effectiveness of project structures and mechanisms in enabling joined-up decision making between partnership members
- activities undertaken by the partnership, partnership development issues, community involvement and service redesign
- an updated Best Start action plan (if changes are required).

Reporting

Six-monthly project updates which outline how the project is tracking in terms of attainment of project tasks and milestones and adherence to the action plan are also required.

6. Participating in evaluation

A key requirement of the project is for partnerships to participate in an evaluation. The Department of Human Services will develop an evaluation strategy to be implemented by all Best Start projects. The evaluation requirements will be available prior to the completion of action plans in 2006 and should be incorporated as a core requirement within these action plans.

Sustaining change

Sustaining change through service redesign, co-location, coordination and integration is an expected outcome of Best Start. Strategies to enhance the sustainability of outcomes include:

- ensuring that changes are made within mainstream services
- building a culture of critical inquiry and evaluation into the work of early years services and networks
- building onto other related initiatives that can support and maintain positive changes
- evaluating what works best and for whom as part of accountable service delivery and identifying best value and best practice
- ensuring that parents are actively consulted and engaged in service planning and evaluation.

Section 3

Project governance

Legal status of partnership

A local partnership will function as a voluntary arrangement between the membership organisations and will have no collective legal status. It is expected that the partnership will develop a partnership agreement that identifies mutual expectations and partnership principles, including the way that partners will work together.

The representative of participating organisations in the partnership should have delegated authority to make decisions and commitments on the organisation's behalf in partnership meetings to expedite decision making.

Partnership

The partnership must be structured and have processes in place that enable efficient and democratic decision making. The partnership may well change over time. A partnership may want to involve all members in detailed decisions about the **Best Start** action plan. Once the plan has been signed-off and activity commences, smaller work groups may be more appropriate to deal with particular issues and activities.

Although the membership may change over time, the partnership, lead by the facilitating partner, will maintain responsibility for delivering the **Best Start** project throughout its life and is ultimately responsible for its success.

The partnership fund holder

Partnerships will need to appoint a fund holder, which will be the organisation with whom the department contracts. The fund holder will be one of the essential partners and an incorporated body responsible for receiving, distributing and acquitting project funding. The same organisation may also be nominated as the facilitating partner.

The fund holder will ensure that the project complies with the terms and conditions of the service agreement and that the partnership has the right administrative and information systems in place to communicate fully and meet project deadlines and reporting requirements.

The funding and contractual requirements on the fund holder as the incorporated and accountable body receiving funds from government cannot be varied in any way without endorsement by the department through the regional office.

Financial management

Financial management of the project will be the responsibility of the fund holder-facilitating partner. Clear and transparent arrangements need to be agreed for this role, responsibility and the limits of this agent's authority.

The fund holder will be responsible for ensuring that sound financial systems are in place and for ensuring that money is managed and spent according to partnership direction, consistent with these guidelines and representing best value for money.

The Department of Human Services is the government **Best Start** auspice partner with funding and contracting responsibility for the project. The regional director in which the project sits is the departmental officer with delegated authority to sign off the department's commitment to the partnership and to contract with the fund holder nominated by the partnership.

In keeping with the joint Department of Education and Training and Department of Human Services auspice, in practice, both regional directors must be satisfied with the partnership arrangements and the action planning process.

The funding agreement

The department will enter into a funding and service agreement with the fund holder following sign off of the partnership agreement.

Consistent with the normal contractual terms and conditions of the Department of Human Services, Best Start funds must only be used for the agreed activities or formally endorsed changes specifically approved by the department.

Partnerships will receive written advice that their Best Start action plan has been approved.

Changes to the facilitating partner or partnership structure

Should the fund holder change, a new funding and service agreement will be established with the new incorporated body nominated by the partnership.

Regional participation in partnerships

Prior to finalisation of the partnership agreement, the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training have nominated regional staff to represent them on each of the partnerships. These staff are the first point of contact for assistance, negotiation and guidance from government.

The regional officers will support partnerships and monitor progress in achieving Best Start's objectives and outcomes. They will facilitate the sharing of innovative practice between Best Start projects by developing and participating in appropriate networks.

Project funding

Best Start authorises and supports communities and early years services to be innovative in order to work towards better outcomes for all young children and their families within a community.

The project draws almost exclusively upon the existing investment in early years services.

The project funding, however, recognises that genuine community participation in Best Start

activities may require some additional resourcing.

Project funding varies with the type of project but is not sufficient, nor should it be used to address gaps in services that cannot be met through the redesigning of existing services.

Funding may support the following types of activities:

- **Supporting the formation of partnerships and the development of action plans**

This funding may assist in paying costs associated with developing and formalising the Best Start partnership, undertaking the mapping and analysis of local needs, services and infrastructure, and identifying priorities for service innovations that will form the basis of the Best Start action plan.

Initial costs associated with engaging parents, including transport and child care, consultation processes, such as forums and early survey activities, fun days, local printed materials and some early administrative support in drafting the outline of the action plan, would be typical areas of expenditure.

- **Appointment of a community facilitator**

Best Start's success to date has been partly due to the appointment of an experienced Best Start community facilitator to manage the project on behalf of the partnership. The facilitator should be a local champion for the project. The facilitator's role is to resource, support and implement partnership decisions and manage the documentation, implementation and formal endorsement of the local action plan. The facilitator is generally the key contact for the partnership and also coordinates evaluation activities.

- **Community (parental) - costs of involvement**

Funding may be used to support ongoing parental involvement in the partnership and all key aspects of decision making. This funding may be used in a variety of ways, including transport, child care and other associated costs.

- **Community initiatives - establishment funding**

Funding may be used to support a range of local initiatives determined by the partnership as supporting or complementary to improving early years activities, including, but not limited to, social marketing, publications, community events, recreation activities, child and family fun days that raise the profile of the early years and mobilise broader community awareness and involvement.

- **Local data collection/evaluation/administration activities**

Partnerships may need to undertake some local data collection to investigate or monitor progress in particular areas of local interest or concern. Funding may be used to cover additional costs related to local project data collection. A Best Start project officer within

the Office for Children will also be available to assist partnerships with data collection queries and methods.

- **In-kind support**

Participation by communities and organisations within projects often includes an in-kind contribution to the project, including administrative support and use of existing infrastructure. It is also expected that participating agencies and organisations will fund their own participation in partnership activities as part of existing funding arrangements, local networking and good practice. Opportunities also exist to build on a range of other State and Commonwealth initiatives that will mutually value add to **Best Start** and other activities and programs in sites.

Signing off on funding

Figure 5 summarises the requirements for funding to flow to partnerships. Funding will be provided through monthly payments, consistent with the terms and conditions of the service agreement between the Department of Human Services and the fund holder agency following regional sign off. including endorsement of:

- the partnership membership and supporting documentation
- a commitment to develop a preliminary action plan framework and an action plan
- a commitment to conduct the project in accordance with these project guidelines.

Partnership documentation will be finalised through negotiation with the relevant Regional Director, Department of Human Services, the fund holding and contracting auspice for the Best Start project within government for sign-off.

Figure 5 Contracting and funding of partnerships



Conditions of Best Start funding

The conditions of Best Start funding are:

- All decisions regarding the expenditure of project funding will be taken by the Best Start partnership consistent with the Best Start action plan.
- The incorporated body nominated as the fund holder will be the contracted agency that will receive, be held accountable for, and report against expenditure of funds on behalf of the partnership.
- Funding is to be used only for activities directly related to the project, including the development of the Best Start partnership, employment of a facilitator, and the activities associated with the development, implementation and evaluation of the Best Start action plan.
- Any breach of these conditions, including use of funds other than for the agreed purposes, will be dealt with as part of due departmental process.
- The requirements in these project guidelines and any subsequent amendments are adhered to.

Note: *Funding is not to be used for additional direct care service provision.*

Funding is limited to the duration of the Best Start initiative over four years. Funds not expended in any one year may be rolled over subject to approval from the Regional Director of the Department of Human Services.

The Department of Human Services will take action, according to the terms and conditions of the service agreement, if the partnership fails to meet the conditions of the contract, including those agreements identified in the Best Start action plan.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Linking to other initiatives: place based and planning frameworks

To make a lasting difference, Best Start projects must fit strategically into the wider landscape of services for young children and their families. A crucial component of local planning is to use other local activity that will add strength to the local Best Start partnership and avoid duplication of effort. This means using and building on existing services and developing coordinated and integrated approaches with other relevant initiatives.

The project and program linkages identified below provide valuable opportunities to value add to Best Start with mutual benefits arising from joint actions and rationalisation of common and competing tasks.

Embedding key messages regarding the critical importance of the early years for the health, wellbeing, learning and development of children into other activities and programs is an important part of developing sustainable change and improvements that would not necessarily be viable as stand-alone endeavours.

Public Health Initiatives (Department of Human Services)

The Public Health Group is responsible for a broad range of health services, policy and program areas across Victoria. Public health initiatives or programs located in an early childhood settings include, but are not limited to, immunisation, injury prevention, physical activity and healthy nutrition.

Public Health recently played a lead role in raising awareness of healthy eating within the early childhood sector of local government. This work included a partnership with the Royal Children's Hospital to strengthen strategic approaches to child nutrition. One of the outcomes of this work was the 'Filling the Gap' project, which sought to assist local government to develop creative and sustainable approaches to child nutrition through the Municipal Early Years planning framework.

The project focused on key childhood settings, such as kindergartens, centre-based child care, family day care and maternal and child health centres, as suitable sites for the implementation of sustainable approaches to nutrition. Knowledge gained from this project has informed the development of the 'Kids - Go For Your Life' project due to commence towards the end of 2005.

Safe Start is another public health initiative that focuses on injury prevention.

For further information about other Public Health initiatives, visit the Public Health website at: www.health.vic.gov.au/phtopics

Early childhood intervention services

Early childhood intervention services are funded through the Department of Human Services and are provided through Specialist Children's Services teams and early intervention agencies.

The overall aim of the service is to provide parents and families with the knowledge, skills and support to meet the needs of their child and to optimise the child's development and ability to participate in family and community life.

In particular, the service provides support for children with a disability or developmental delay from birth to school entry, and their families, through special education, therapy, counselling, service planning and coordination, assistance and support to access services such as kindergarten and child care.

For further information contact Specialist Children's Services at the appropriate Department of Human Services regional office.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Neighbourhood Renewal is a 'place-based' State Government initiative aimed at narrowing the gap between the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria and the rest of the state. The initiative acknowledges and affirms the central importance of strong and inclusive environments for the health and wellbeing of children and their families.

Neighbourhood Renewal aims to address local disadvantage through better targeting services and programs to those most in need, improving access to better coordinated services and by dealing with the social and environmental factors that impact on health and wellbeing.

Partnerships play a central role in Neighbourhood Renewal projects, bringing together residents, government, business, service providers and the local community in the development and implementation of a community action plan.

The Neighbourhood Renewal partnerships provide a valuable opportunity for Best Start to work collaboratively to communicate the importance of the early years of life for the health, wellbeing, learning and development of children and to develop local solutions to local issues.

For further information see: www.neighbourhoodrenewal.vic.gov.au

Family Support Innovation Projects

The Child Protection and Family Services Branch brings together responsibilities and programs supporting the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, with a focus on vulnerable families and children at risk of maltreatment.

Stronger links between universal services, family services and child protection services will support the government's reform directions and assist in creating a prevention and early intervention focus. The Family Services program has started to create these service system links through the establishment of the Family Support Innovation Projects.

An evaluation of the State Child Protection service data within 2000–01 indicated that two

thirds of children notified to Child Protection in Victoria had been notified before. Most of these children presented with issues that were complex and required longer term and more flexible support options from Child Protection and Family Services. This data analysis was the impetus of the establishment of the new approach to child and family support services in 2002-03.

In partnership with a number of community service organisations and local government authorities, the State Government of Victoria is taking a new approach to supporting vulnerable families whose needs are complex, through the establishment and implementation of Family Support Innovations Projects.

The Family Support Innovation Projects aim to:

- divert a significant proportion of families currently notified to Child Protection services to community-based services
- minimise clients who are renotified to Child Protection and the progression of families into the child protection system
- provide an enhanced family support capacity for vulnerable families, including those who may not come into contact with child protection services.

This new approach also aims to better integrate child protection with family support and other services.

Family Support Innovation Projects have now been established in 29 local government areas, seven working specifically with Indigenous families and 12 new projects to be established in 2006. Expansion of the successful Family Support Innovation Projects is to enable statewide access, consistent with proposed reforms to the *Children and Young Persons Act 1989*. This proposal provides funds to further expand the Innovation Projects to bring coverage up to 44 local government areas (56 per cent of Victoria's 79 local government areas), in communities that account for 62 per cent of the State's annual Child Protection notifications by the end of 2005-06.

The networks work closely with vulnerable families and their children and provide a valuable opportunity to build a strong interface and collaborative approach with Best Start.

For further information about the Family Support Innovation Projects, contact the Department of Human Services Family Services Unit via email at: families@dhs.vic.gov.au

Primary Care Partnerships

Primary Care Partnerships were established in 2000 and comprise community and women's health agencies, local governments, divisions of general practice and other organisations in geographic catchments.

The Primary Care Partnership strategy aims to improve the experience and health and wellbeing outcomes of people using primary health care services, reduce the use of hospital, medical and residential services through a greater emphasis on health promotion programs and improve coordinated service responses to people experiencing early signs of disease and who are in need for support.

Partnerships aim to build an integrated health care system structured around consumers, not agencies or programs. Evidence-based health promotion, early intervention and prevention play a key role, as does widespread consumer, carer and community participation in service design, implementation and evaluation.

Primary Care Partnerships use a social model of health providing strong synergies with the Best Start approach. A number of partnerships have previously identified early childhood as an important setting for early intervention to improve community health and provide a key planning platform to progress an early childhood health and wellbeing agenda.

For further information, visit the website: www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/

Disability Metro and Rural Access

Metro and Rural Access was implemented in partnership with local government providing positive opportunities for Disability Services and local government to create a shared vision and 'joined-up' effort in supporting greater participation and inclusion of people with disabilities in local communities.

Metro and Rural Access is based on a 'whole of community' framework and reflects a community building approach. The aim is to create communities that are relevant, affirming and inclusive of the needs and aspirations of people with a disability.

Extensive community mapping and development of a community building plan are key activities in the implementation phase of Metro and Rural Access, providing a rich source of information for Best Start to build on. Additionally, Metro and Rural Access offers valuable opportunities to work in partnership with Best Start on mutually beneficial projects relevant to children with a disability and their families.

For further information, visit the website at: [//hnb.dhs.vic.gov.au/ds/disabilitysite.nsf](http://hnb.dhs.vic.gov.au/ds/disabilitysite.nsf)

Department for Victorian Communities Local Teams and Key Contacts

In 2004, the Department for Victorian Communities provided additional people and community strengthening resources across Victoria. Teams have been formed bringing together regional youth, employment, local government and sport and recreation staff and additional new resources to give priority to community strengthening activities.

DVC has appointed a Community Engagement Manager to lead and coordinate activity of six local teams covering: Hume (Wangaratta); Loddon Mallee (Bendigo); Gippsland (Traralgon); Barwon South West (Geelong); Grampians (Ballarat); and Greater Melbourne (1 Spring Street).

DVC local staff are available to provide information and assistance with community strengthening initiatives and community support grant applications.

Appendix 2 Examples of services and organisations with an interest in children

The following services and organisations have an interest in children's and parents' health, development, learning and wellbeing. They may be useful contacts and participants in local Best Start partnerships.

- Aboriginal organisations/agencies
- Adult and community education providers
- Centrelink
- Child protection services
- Child care: long day care, family day care and occasional care
- Community health centres
- Dental services
- Early intervention/Specialist Children's Services
- Education precincts
- English language centres
- Education service providers
- Family support programs – early parenting centres
- General practitioners
- Hospitals
- Housing and support services
- Libraries
- Local government
- Maternal and child health services
- Maternity services
- Migrant resource centres
- Neighbourhood houses
- Nursing mothers groups
- Nutrition education programs
- Parenting programs
- Playgroups and parenting support groups
- Kindergarten
- Primary schools
- P-12 schools
- School breakfast programs
- School nursing programs
- School principals' groups
- Special developmental schools
- Special schools
- Sporting clubs and networks
- Student support services

Other agencies may include:

- QUIT
- Police

Appendix 3 Guide to action plan contents

A. Partnership information

This section must contain:

- The name of the project (which must be the name of the catchment followed by '**Best Start**')
- The names of the facilitating partner and the fund holder (where nominated separately) including legal status, a contact name, address, phone and fax numbers and e-mail address
- The names of all members of the partnership, their contact names, addresses, phone and fax numbers and e-mail addresses
- Dated signatures of all partnership members (signed by the authorised officer of all organisations).

B. Project management

This section must contain:

- Written documentation of roles, functions and structural arrangements between the partnership, facilitating partner, fund holder (where nominated separately), parent groups and other members.
- Documentation of the arrangements for management of the project, including budget management and key contact and information points.
- Grievance procedures to be followed to resolve conflict between partnership members.
- The name, address, phone and fax numbers and email address of the community facilitator appointed by the partnership and the membership organisation to which the position is attached.
- Strategies for ensuring that the particular needs of Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse children and families, minority and special needs groups will be included within the project through effective consultation and representation on the partnership.
- Strategies for engaging parents actively in decision making throughout the project, including 'hard to reach' parents.
- Strategies for consulting children about their needs where appropriate.
- Communication strategies to disseminate information about the project, including

planning forums, parent and child fun days.

- Up front projections of the initial (six-month) project expenditure against specific activities.

C. Budget

This section must contain:

- A description of the specific service innovations on which the Service Enhancement funding will be spent (this may change over the duration of the project).
- A description of the activities that the Community Participation funding will be spent on (these may change over the duration of the project).
- How the expenditure of all project funding will be managed and accounted for.

D . Site assessment

This section must contain:

- Maps showing the location of the project catchment area and the catchment area itself in greater detail with the boundary clearly marked and community infrastructure, including recreation facilities, playgrounds, parks and swimming pools, service outlets, roads, public transport routes, clearly marked.
- A comprehensive description of the community in terms of the 'early years' built up from the mapping of births, numbers of young children and families, service availability and community resources and infrastructure.
- The spread of early childhood risks across the project site.
- A profile of the Best Start indicators across the site compared with the population profile (base line data).
- Other local programs and initiatives and their relationship to Best Start.
- Other strengths and problems of the site.
- A short descriptive **summary** of the above.

E. Consultations

This section must contain:

The key themes and issues emerging from consultations clustered under the three categories:

- Children, parent/families consultations, including those with families and community leaders from Aboriginal communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, special needs and difficult-to-reach groups, such as transient and homeless families, refugees and other newly arrived immigrants.
- Service consultations, including those conducted with universal early years as well as related specialist services and volunteer groups.
- Community stakeholder consultations, including those groups or organisations within a community that play a role, or have a potential role to play, in early childhood, including sport and recreation clubs, voluntary organisations, peak bodies and advocacy groups and businesses.

F. Service analysis

This section must contain:

An analysis of the universal early years services that are currently provided for children from pregnancy to transition to school (0-8 years) and their families in the area including:

- Who is providing them?
- Where and when are they provided?
- What is their capacity?
- How well they meet local needs and what parents and if applicable, children think of them?

G. Reshaping services

This section must contain:

- A description of how existing services will be re-shaped to better meet local needs.
- Priorities for service changes and innovation.
- The evidence base underlying proposed changes and service innovations.
- How the service innovations will address the needs of Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse children and families and those from minority groups.
- How the service innovations will address the needs of children and parents with special needs, including service linkages and relationships.
- Mechanisms and strategies for linking with specific other local related initiatives.
- Information about broader community activities that will be undertaken to support the needs of young children and their families.
- Strategies to manage change within and between services.

H. Outcome and indicator targets

This section must contain:

Practical description of the impacts and outcomes to be achieved through service innovations including:

- quantified rates of improvement for the **Best Start** indicators at the end of year 1 and indicative rates for years 2–3 that the partnership is aiming to achieve (Years 2, 3 and 4 may be revised as the project evolves)
- how parents will experience these changes on the ground
- how children will experience these changes on the ground
- Measures and targets regarding local issues of concern or interest.

I. Monitoring and evaluation

This section must contain:

- Baseline information for Best Start indicators and any local targets and measures.
- Quarterly, six-monthly and annual milestones for project updates and reports.
- The mechanisms and processes for collecting, managing and monitoring information for both project performance and outcome measurement.
- An outline of the plans for local evaluation of the project.

J. Sustaining the change

Specific strategies to be employed to ensure that the learnings from the project are incorporated into mainstream service provision.

Appendix 4 Roles, responsibilities and competencies

Community facilitator

The community facilitator is likely to have a mix of the following skills and qualifications:

- demonstrated leadership capacity and managerial and networking skills
- the ability to work collaboratively and effectively as a key change agent, across service/program, sectoral and organisational boundaries
- an understanding of the local community, including how to engage marginalised groups and isolated members
- substantial project management skills and experience with community work, including well-developed facilitation and consulting skills, interpersonal and negotiation skills including problem-solving and conflict resolution
- highly developed conceptual/analytical skills
- highly developed communication skills (written and verbal) and presentation skills
- a working knowledge/understanding of the early years vision
- a working knowledge of the relationships/linkages between different sectors (for example, not-for-profit, business, charitable, voluntary and local government), and how to negotiate with them
- experience in budgeting and expenditure management
- computer literacy.

The Best Start community facilitator will likely:

- manage the administration of the project on behalf of the partnership
- provide executive support to the partnership
- carry out specific tasks of activity, as directed by the partnership and under the guidance of central and regional Best Start staff
- co-ordinate the development and documentation of the Best Start action plan for endorsement by the partnership and sign-off by government
- provide information to other key local players and planning bodies
- work with Best Start regional staff and the central project team to disseminate lessons learned to other communities across the province
- follow up to ensure commitments are kept and any agreements, policies, procedures, protocols and guidelines are followed
- maintain ongoing communication with Best Start central, and prepare and submit reports
- actively support project evaluation at the local level and act as the key contact for the statewide Best Start evaluation.

Best Start partnership

The Best Start partnership will likely:

- provide leadership, championing the needs of very young children and their families
- make all key decisions regarding the project and clearly delegate administrative decisions regarding day to day project management to membership organisations or the community facilitator
- link to/ build on all related existing services, early years networks and organisations
- mobilise all sectors in support of early child development and parenting
- develop and implement strategies for reaching out to members of the community who have not traditionally been involved in this kind of activity
- involve parents, caregivers and other key decision makers from the community, others involved in the lives of young children in the community
- identify subcommittees required to promote specific activities at the community level
- develop strategies for reaching out to members of the community who are isolated and/or who have not traditionally been involved in this kind of planning or service provision/utilisation
- provide direction to the community facilitator
- establish planning subcommittees with managers from regions and local government
- ensure these subcommittees have balanced representation among parents/caregivers, government-funded service providers, the business sector, and charitable, service, voluntary and faith organisations.

The partnership will also develop a local communication strategy that will improve local community knowledge and awareness of activities, including:

- communicating the Best Start vision and core values associated with early childhood, parents and communities
- showcasing programs and resources that illustrate the vision of Best Start
- developing key messages to engage all sectors, including parents/caregivers, business, charitable, voluntary and service organisations
- preparing press releases, news and feature stories, guest columns, public service announcements and fact sheets
- scheduling/convening press conferences and community forums; developing/creating newsletters, posters, flyers and other promotional materials
- creating a local website and distribution lists
- developing a strategy for managing communications issues.

Appendix 5 Best Start publications and resources

Best Start evidence base: best start for children. The evidence base underlying investment in the early years (children 0-8), Department of Human Services, 2001.

Best Start: effective intervention programs: examples of effective interventions, programs and service models Department of Human Services, 2001.

The Best Start Indicators Project, Department of Human Services, 2001.

The Aboriginal Best Start status report, Department of Human Services 2004.

'Best Start video and data booklet' Department of Human Services 2004.

Breaking Cycles, Building Futures: Promoting inclusion into antenatal and universal early childhood services, Department of Human Services 2004

The Best Start Atlas, Department of Human Services, 2005.

Best Start website: www.beststart.vic.gov.au

Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs at www.voma.vic.gov.au

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria at www.eccv.org.au

Victorian Multicultural Commission a www.multicultural.vic.gov.au