Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts?

A research project about collaborating for better Natural Resource Management
by Shane Scanlon
Acknowledgements

This research project was initiated by the Living Links alliance of councils and agencies in south-east Melbourne. It was hosted by the City of Greater Dandenong, and was co-funded by the Victorian Local Sustainability Accord and the Port Phillip and Westernport CMA.

The research project has benefitted from the experience, candour, intellectual contributions and assistance of many people. These include the project supervisor Jane Brodie and members of the Project Control Group – Bronwyn Davies, Kirstyn Lee, Nadine Gaskell and Viv Charalambous; project advisers Nina Rogers and Dr Rebekah Brown; David Buntine, Chris Lewis, Jayne Van Souwe and the team at Wallis Consulting Group, Leanne Nicholls, and all the members of agencies and councils who participated in the survey interviews for the project.

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Published by Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority, Frankston, July 2011

Phone (03) 8781 7900

ISBN. 978-0-9871059-2-9

Printed on 100% recycled paper using vegetable based inks.

www.ppwcma.vic.gov.au

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABM        Association of Bayside Municipalities
CGD        City of Greater Dandenong
CMA        Catchment Management Authority
DSE        Department of Sustainability and Environment
FTE        Full-time Equivalent
LL         Living Links
LLMP       Living Links Master Plan
MAV        Municipal Association of Victoria
NRM        Natural Resource Management
PPWCMA     Port Phillip and Westernport CMA
RCS        Regional Catchment Strategy
SECCCA     South East Councils Climate Change Alliance
VLSA       Victoria Local Sustainability Accord
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Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts?

A research project initiated by Living Links and the Victorian Local Sustainability Accord
by Shane Scanlon

A research project about collaborating for better Natural Resource Management

Executive Summary

‘Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts?’ was chosen as the title of this research report because it sums up the most prominent factor that this research found motivates people to participate in a collaborative activity – they see greater benefits from collaborating than taking individual action.

Collaboration among state, regional and local organisations is often a vital component of natural resource management (NRM).

The processes of nature don’t recognise boundaries of land tenure, political borders or divisions of responsibility within organisations - so plans and programs to enhance environmental assets or mitigate environmental threats are often best developed at a landscape, catchment or regional scale. And this will generally require the formation of project alliances with multiple agencies and local governments.

But alliances of this type can be difficult to initiate and even harder to sustain. They require negotiation of shared objectives, mutual trust, commitment to the ‘common wealth’, patience and a readiness to ‘give and take’ – not always in equal proportions.

The aims, objectives and driving imperatives of a large organisation with regional-scale responsibilities (such as a Catchment Management Authority) may not align easily with those of local governments, whose core business is focused around serving the needs of the constituents of a defined council area. Environmental collaborations that require cross-boundary planning and implementation can therefore be a challenge for councils.

There have been many studies to identify the ‘drivers’ for achieving successful organisational collaboration, and as many again to identify the ‘barriers’ that inhibit it. Many of these drivers and barriers are embedded in the policies and cultures of the respective organisations and are perpetuated by influential people within them.

Living Links and the Victorian Sustainability Accord

Living Links is an alliance involving nineteen NRM agencies, councils and community environment groups who aim to work together to protect and connect green open space and natural assets in the urban and peri-urban environment of south-east Melbourne. Now in its seventh year, it is still progressing and growing.

In 2009, the City of Greater Dandenong (a Living Links partner council) and the Port Phillip and Westernport CMA instigated a timely review of Living Links. The review, which was subsequently funded by the Victorian Local Sustainability Accord was entitled ‘Developing a model to build Councils’ capacity to work together on NRM Projects’.

The findings of the review are the basis of this report. The review established the importance of collaboration for NRM, and the keys for successful collaboration as identified by Living Links participants. It also provided advice and strategies to overcome the organisational barriers that invariably stifle effective and beneficial NRM alliances.
The factors that the review identified often underpin successful NRM collaborations include:

- Strong project management
- Clear objectives and focus
- Trust and equality among collaborators
- The collaboration provides leverage and gets things done that would not otherwise be possible
- The benefits of the collaboration outweigh the costs.

Conversely, the common barriers to achieving successful collaborations were identified as:

- Lack of commitment among the collaborators
- Collaborators are of unequal status and/or feel unable to affect action
- Political and other individual agendas intervene
- No joint ownership, or someone hijacks the collaboration
- Collaborators are working at different speeds
- Objectives and focus of the collaboration change.

**Recommendations for effective NRM collaborations**

The recommendations in this report are drawn from the specific experiences of Living Links, and identify six elements considered essential to establishing an effective and enduring collaborative NRM alliance like Living Links.

These recommendations are:

1. Align organisational objectives
2. Allocate sufficient resources for project development
3. Maintain a clear and consistent focus
4. Recognise and cultivate what your partners value in the alliance
5. Recognise and resource your champions
6. Develop strategies to influence the stiflers.

The Appendices to this report also provide a set of guidelines and tools for councils and NRM agencies to help plan and implement more successful collaborative NRM programs.
1. Introduction and report scope

1.1 Living Links – a case study of collaboration

Living Links is a catchment-scale, natural resource management alliance initiated by the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority (PPWCMA) in 2005.

The functions and powers of the PPWCMA as defined in the Catchment and Land Protection Act (1994) include “to promote the cooperation of persons and bodies involved in the management of land and water resources in the region in preparing and implementing the (Regional Catchment) Strategy ...”

Living Links is focused on the catchment of Dandenong Creek and its tributaries across the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. It is the main case study for this research project which seeks to identify replicable success factors and recommended methods for establishing and sustaining NRM collaborations in other areas.
Over its six-year life, Living Links has continuously demonstrated that investment and action by one or more like-minded organisations in environmental works can help influence priorities and drive decisions in other organisations to invest in works which may be considered connected or complementary. For example, a decision by a council or other agencies to invest in waterway enhancement works in a particular area can prompt another council – upstream or downstream - to initiate, advance the timing of, or increase the scope of its own investment in that waterway to optimise the outcomes of its investment.

Furthermore, that collective focus by those councils or agencies – seen to be working together - can then make that waterway a more attractive investment proposition for corporate and philanthropic investors from outside the traditional government-funded environmental investment frameworks. Living Links is an effective application of this ‘leveraged funding’ model as a means of increasing and diversifying environmental investment in a defined area.

Living Links was initiated by Port Phillip and Western Port Catchment Management Authority in consultation with a group of like-minded stakeholder councils and agencies in 2005, to raise the profile of and address the critical environmental challenges in the Dandenong Creek catchment to the east of Melbourne. Living Links now counts 19 organisations as its active and financial members.

Its current Steering Committee comprises representatives from:
- Port Phillip and Westernport CMA
- Bushwalking Victoria
- Bicycle Victoria
- Gould Group
- Melbourne Water
- Parks Victoria
- First Friends of Dandenong Creek
- South East Water
- Landcare Australia Limited
- Bayside City Council
- Casey City Council
- Frankston City Council
- Greater Dandenong City Council
- Kingston City Council
- Knox City Council
- Maroondah City Council
- Monash City Council
- Whitehorse City Council
- Yarra Ranges Shire Council.

The main, longer-term focus of Living Links is to develop a connectivity Master Plan for the catchment of the Dandenong Creek and its tributaries. The Master Plan will help ensure future protection, connectivity and enhancement of the area’s remaining natural, recreational and cultural assets in the face of ongoing urban and industrial development and densification.

The Master Plan is seen as the ‘glue’ that will bond the long term commitment of the 19 participating agencies to continue to consider catchment-scale and regional environmental impacts in their local planning policies and decisions.

Living Links is established under a formal collaborative partnership agreement. It operates in compliance with the Living Links Charter as a formal Committee to the Port Phillip and Westernport CMA Board. Participating councils and agencies pay an annual subscription which contributes to program coordination. This subscription is negotiated on a pro-rata basis taking account of each partner’s capacity to contribute. More detail about the history, development and activities of Living Links is available at www.livinglinks.com.au
1.2 Why NRM programs depend on effective collaborations

Natural resource management (NRM) programs include a range of activities such as weed control, waterway enhancement, coastal management, bioregional-scale revegetation projects or large-scale open space or connectivity planning. They invariably benefit from, and often depend on, a scale of planning and implementation that transcends the boundaries that define - and often confine - institutions such as municipal councils.

The flows of nature do not recognise the political boundaries we draw on maps. Waterways flow through multiple council areas. Weeds blow with the wind. The territory of animal pests is rarely confined to areas under a particular land manager’s control. Receiving waters such as Port Phillip Bay and Western Port can be impacted by degrading processes that occur in the upper reaches of their catchments which may be fifty kilometres or more from the coast. The catchments in the PPW region may traverse up to a dozen councils or more. And ground water tables which affect soil health and productivity may stretch for hundreds of kilometres – out-of-sight and sometimes out-of-mind – beneath any number of terrestrial landscapes.

Yet the ‘place-based’ political structures that our society has established since European settlement often over-ride the logic of landscape-scale environmental planning and management. The history of environmental improvement projects across Australia and elsewhere is punctuated with endeavours planned at an ineffective scale and/or implemented in an illogical sequence.

The differences among councils can add a further layer of complexity to the challenge of developing collaborative projects with them.

The extent and variety of the demands placed on each council for a range of social, administrative and physical services depends on variables including their size, location, demographics, wealth, extent and condition of existing infrastructure; the political ideologies of their councillors and senior management, and many other factors. And there is not always a clear definition as to which level of government – local, State or Federal – should have funding and service delivery responsibility for particular services.

Consequently a wide range of council-based services – from libraries, to roads of various status, to home care services, to recreation facilities – are now funded and resourced by a complex hybrid of subsidies, grants and inter-government partnership arrangements. And the concept of ‘core business’ can vary markedly from council to council.

Defining ‘natural resource management’

In the case of environmental management services of a municipal council, ‘core business’ is most often perceived and defined by the council’s physical boundaries. Just as the Council is not expected to empty the garbage and recycling bins outside of its boundaries, so too it may not feel it should be expected to undertake physical planning and environmental improvement works in a neighbouring council area. It seems reasonable then that a Council’s environmental ‘core business’ is the planning and management of the physical environment within its gazetted municipal boundaries.

So an appropriate way of defining ‘natural resource management’ for the purpose of this research project is to draw the distinction between:

- projects that are primarily planned and implemented in a way that will achieve the best and most cost-effective environmental outcomes in terms of scope and scale (which we will call ‘regional NRM projects’), and
- projects which are primarily defined and confined by the political influence or financial resources of a particular council or institution (which we will call ‘local environmental projects’).

This dichotomy of responsibilities of course presents a challenge for many local governments (management and councillors). How can they embrace and deliver on what might be considered their regional NRM responsibilities if that requires justifying to their community the spending of locally-generated financial resources on environmental projects in another council area? Even though logic and science would support that their investment outside their boundaries may provide the best environmental outcomes - it is a brave (and sometimes temporary) councillor who argues the merits of, for example, waterway rehabilitation works upstream of his own municipality ahead of the building of a much-needed playground or child health facility in his own local ward or council constituency.
When the Kennett Victorian Government (1992-1999) introduced sweeping local government reforms in the early 1990s, it redrew many of the local government boundaries across Victoria. These reforms reduced the number of Victorian councils from 210 to 79, resulting in fewer, larger council areas. The Kennett reforms achieved a wide array of benefits and efficiencies which are still acknowledged and being optimised today. But they were also an opportunity lost, because in many areas they perpetuated the use of rivers and creeks as boundaries between councils.

It is still as great a challenge as it was in the previous 210-council regime, to encourage Councils to treat shared waterways as landscapes warranting joint management approaches - rather than as borders that can stifle both cooperation and communication. The cross-boundary planning required to achieve best practice when an environmental project traverses multiple boundaries and organisations’ responsibilities relies on effective collaboration – the type of collaboration aspired to and being demonstrated by Living Links.

The importance of installing a new paradigm for the way that Councils and other agencies plan and implement environmental projects has given rise to the current regime of regional environmental planning organisations, based on waterway catchments, throughout Australia since the late 1980s.

These regional bodies – known as Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) in Victoria – have made a steady impact on helping more locally-focused agencies such as councils review the way they invest in environmental improvement programs. But CMAs’ plans and strategies are still often at odds with the relative autonomy that Councils have as land managers and responsible (planning) authorities, and as defined in the Local Government Act (1989).

Programs like Living Links seek to bridge the inherent lack of alignment between local government boundaries and the scale of natural environmental processes.

1.3 Measures of a successful collaboration

After more than six years of development, Living Links continues to evolve.

Collaborative programs of this type are not easy to sustain as they rely not only on a funding base for their activities but also on ‘volunteer’ participation and in-kind contribution of resources, intellectual rigour, and time on the part of many people from within their supporting organisations.

Although many of the active participants in Living Links are not volunteers in the true sense (in that many are employed in paid roles by their Councils and agencies), they are quasi-volunteers in that the work they do and the time they devote to Living Links would often be considered an ‘added extra’ to their main work tasks and responsibilities.

Even after six years of participation, many may not be obliged to continue to take on ‘optional’ Living Links tasks if they chose not to. If their employing organisations found that the demands of participating in Living Links in time and resources outweighed the perceived benefits that they accrue from their participation, those organisations may quite readily be prepared to withdraw from the program. However, the ‘volunteerism’ that underpins Living Links is consistent and active.

As Living Links developed over time, its partners came to consider it a successful collaboration. The partners in Living Links saw its success in many facets:

- **Financial contributions** - The extent of each partner agency’s willingness to sustain, and in some cases increase their annual financial contributions to PPWCMA for Living Links program coordination over a six year period.
- **Meeting attendance** - Consistent attendance numbers at Steering Committee meetings and workshops (average attendance of 24 people at meetings and workshops held throughout 2008-09-10).
- **Active participation** - Readiness by committee members to take on additional tasks which require significant time commitments eg. several committee members participated in an interview panel to write/review the consultant brief for the Master Plan project, and then conduct interviews with applicants and participate in the selection process. On another occasion four members were involved in writing a detailed project funding submission which required collation of complex information from multiple partner organisations.
• **Engagement of broader internal audiences** - High response rates by participating agencies to collaborative activities eg. collating and reporting responses from broader audiences to the Master Plan Corridors feedback booklet as recorded in LLMP project 1 and 2 reports.

• **Progress on a complex Master Plan** - Steady progress in development of the Living Links Master Plan despite intensive and demanding level of participation required by members.

• **Positive anecdotal feedback** - Consistent frequency and positive nature of anecdotal feedback that Living Links provides the types of benefits and opportunities to member organisations that it purports to deliver.

• **Number of identifiable ‘champions’** - Readiness of steering committee members to ‘champion’ and promote the Living Links program within their own organisations and to their broader networks and communities.

This initial list of success indicators was based on anecdotal rather than objective or empirical evidence, but they led the Living Links partners to consider the benefits of analysing Living Links as a replicable model of NRM collaboration by other groups in other settings. They set about seeking funding support for a research project to further explore these benefits and common elements of NRM collaboration.

1.4 The objectives and administration of this research project

In mid 2009 the City of Greater Dandenong on behalf of the Living Links Steering Committee applied for a grant through the Victorian Local Sustainability Accord (VLSA) to undertake a research study. It would analyse the processes and the learnings from Living Links’ first six years. It would test our assumptions about the reasons for Living Links’ success; and explore if it might guide others pursuing collaborative environmental programs with multiple councils and other partners.

The City of Greater Dandenong hosted the project grant application on behalf of the Living Links group of councils. The research project was supervised by Ms Jane Brodie, Team Leader – Urban Design, Open Space and Sustainability (City of Greater Dandenong), supported by a representative Project Control Group comprising Ms Nadine Gaskell (City of Knox), Ms Bronwyn Davies and Ms Kirstyn Lee (DSE) and Mr Viv Charalambous (Port Phillip and Westernport CMA).

The research project on which this report is based was entitled: “Developing a model to build Councils’ capacity to work together on NRM projects”.

Its hypothesis was this:

*Living Links is a successful collaboration of Councils for NRM, and by reviewing and analysing its processes and characteristics we can identify success factors that could be replicated in other areas by other groupings of Councils and agencies for more effective and efficient NRM outcomes.*
2. Project Advisers and Literature Review

Two professional advisers provided invaluable guidance in the planning and development of this research project – Dr Rebekah Brown and Ms Nina Rogers – both of whom have a sophisticated understanding of the recent research history of the topics embedded in this study:

2.1 Project Advisers

Dr Rebekah Brown

Dr Rebekah Brown is a Director of Monash University’s Centre for Water Sensitive Cities.

With a PhD in Environmental Studies and a Bachelor of Engineering (Civil), Dr Brown specialises in sustainable urban water management, adaptive environmental governance and socio-technical transitions. She established the National Urban Water Governance program, partnered by 12 water management organisations across Australia, in Monash University’s School of Geography and Environmental Science in 2006.

Dr Brown’s 2004 conference paper to the International Conference on Water Sensitive Urban Design – Cities as Catchments was entitled ‘Local institutional development and organisational change for advancing sustainable urban water futures’. (Brown, 2004)

The paper presented insights from a five-year, and ongoing, research project focused on advancing the implementation of sustainable urban water management.

The paper observes that “….Despite significant transformation in community water values .... sometimes groundbreaking advances in sustainable water management (have) not been enough to shift the inertia of traditional water management within current administrative regimes”.

In short, Dr Brown argued that the nature of a Council’s human resources and organisational capacity, combined with other authorities’ ability to facilitate the development of this capacity, significantly determines the success of integrated catchment management practices.

Dr Brown’s paper identified ‘organisational characteristics’ which can contribute to ‘management inertia’. They included:

- institutional fragmentation
- undefined organisational responsibilities
- limited political incentives and disincentives
- poor organisational commitment
- technological path dependency
- poor community capacity to meaningfully participate, and
- an overall lack of knowledge of integrated management approaches.

The outcome of this ‘inertia’ is that unsustainable urban water management approaches continued to be reinforced and implemented by current administrations. So Dr Brown’s research set out to explore: what are the important developmental characteristics of local government organisations for improving integrated urban water management implementation performance?

In doing so, Dr Brown identified five transitional stages in the development of organisational dynamics with respect to integrated urban water management implementation. These phases from lowest performing (1) to highest performing (5) are called:

- Project phase
- Outsider phase
- Growth phase
- Insider phase, and
- Integrated phase.

These phases have common and distinguishable levels of management action, political capital expertise and organisational structure as well as identifiable organisational cultures. Dr Brown argued that by analysing the way an organisation deals with integrated urban water management activities, councils and other organisations can be characterised by one of these phases. The collaborative catchment planning alliance Living Links, upon which this current research project is based, has benefited from an awareness of Dr Brown’s core principles of organisational capacity and development. So in planning this research project the author met with Dr Brown on 7 June 2010 at Monash University to discuss the project hypothesis and verify that it was a legitimate adaptation of her original and more recent research on these topics. Dr Brown endorsed that the proposed research method would contribute positively to industry understanding of her frameworks and models for integrated environmental planning by Councils and agencies in Australian conditions.
Ms Nina Rogers

The second project adviser whose input was sought in developing and refining the research topic and method is Nina Rogers, who until recently was the Manager of Environment Policy at the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV). (In late 2010, Ms Rogers took up the position of Manager of Climate Communities at Sustainability Victoria.)

Ms Rogers’ was known to have knowledge and continued interest in the factors that drive and enable, or conversely block and inhibit collaboration among Councils in their delivery of natural resource management programs.

Ms Rogers’ most recent research study undertaken in 2009-10 with the support of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Australia is entitled “A study of regional partnerships and collaborative approaches for enhanced local government adaptation to climate change”. (Rogers, 2010)

The study report is a synthesis of Ms Rogers’ “…observations and key learnings from meetings with climate change experts and policy practitioners from municipal councils, local government peak bodies, state and federal government agencies, universities and the philanthropic and private sectors”.

Her report – whilst relating to cross sectoral responses to climate change, rather than mainstream natural resource management - provides commentary from her research in four countries on key topics with direct relevance to this current research study.

It established the common reasons that organisations collaborate in any field of endeavour. These include:

- Collaboration enhances economies of scale between partners and creates opportunity to leverage resources – be they shared staff time and expertise, joint commissioning of data or shared project costs.
- It creates an environment that invites new ideas and approaches.
- It encourages the sharing of best (good) practice, and demonstrates what is possible in real world settings.
- It inspires action amongst peers who perhaps had previously held reservations about what could be achieved.
- It allows for learning by experience, allowing enhanced outcomes by those who go next.
- It allows peer review and critical analysis of work, consistency of approach and comparability to emerge.
- In summary, it builds capacity and commitment.

Ms Rogers’ research explored what motivates and hinders adaptation action (to the related activity of climate change response) by the local government sector; and what makes for successful collaborative approaches on climate change. It offers a series of recommendations on approaches for consideration in an Australian context.

Common factors identified in the study which drive local government action on climate change adaptation include:

- Visibility of impacts and costs that might derive from lack of action
- Peer influence – where a council sees a neighbouring, or other respected council undertaking effort on climate change adaptation, and this leads to questions being asked about ‘What are we doing?’ In these cases community expectation and influential community opinion leaders can be catalysts.
- A desire to be seen to be ‘ahead of the pack’ was also a driver for some, particularly common when a new Mayor or other council leader wished to assert themselves as a standout leader and/or one with ‘green credentials’.
- A leadership void from other levels of government on issues of local concern was also cited as a motivator for action.

Ms Rogers identified what she considers the essential ingredients for successful collaboration. These are:

- Seek to work within existing structures and networks rather than creating new ones
- Allow collaborators or partnerships to self-determine their clusters based on where they have active relationships
- Encourage broad and inclusive networks, bringing together technical experts with decision-makers
- Avoid the collaboration becoming a ‘talk-fest’ by identifying common purpose, and what each party can bring to the table; develop a Terms of Reference to clarify expectations and review it from time to time to help stay ‘on task’.
- Install secretariat support, i.e. someone responsible for making things happen.
- Each party at the table needs to know ‘what is in it for them’; mutual benefits need to be defined and achieved.
- Flexibility is essential to effective collaboration: remaining responsive to new ideas; being open to new partners entering, and old partners walking away when their contribution is made.
• A degree of informality is desirable to enable frank and fearless conversation, although rules of engagement or etiquettes are important so members feel they can participate without having to guard their organisation's position.
• Give the collaboration time to develop; time for mutual trust, respect and understanding to emerge between partners.

Most councils cited a lack of municipal resources as a reason for their level of response to climate change including:
• Staff with time and expertise available to work on adaptation
• Access to data about the nature of impacts for a given location
• Understanding of the appropriate interventions for a location and timing or sequencing for these interventions
• Upfront capital for the introduction of interventions.

Other factors that commonly influenced the capacity of a council to respond included:
• A lack of senior level commitment from within the council administration
• Competing priorities – recognising that municipal councils have a vast number of service responsibilities for their community and simply cannot be responsive to all
• Limited revenue raising capacity through traditional property rates and service user fees models
• Institutional structures and council culture (past and present) that pose challenges to organisational change – particularly with multi-disciplinary problems (like climate change) that affects all service areas - but responsibility rests with an environment team without adequate influence to affect change across the organisation
• Political will – whether or not the issue is a popular vote winner for elected representatives to be seen to be responsive to.

In refining the research method for this current project, the author met with Ms Rogers on Tuesday 20 July, 2010 at the office of the Municipal Association of Victoria to discuss her research method based on a semi-structured interview format and its suitability for this research project.

It was from this meeting that the appropriate combination of survey methods for this study were finalised and verified:
• qualitative, semi-structured interviews relating to comparative case study collaborations in a Victorian local government context (namely the coastal management-related Association of Bayside Municipalities; and the climate change-related SECCA – the South East Councils Climate Change Alliance)
• qualitative, semi-structured interviews with objective, third party agency participants in the collaboration (namely Melbourne Water, South East Water and Parks Victoria)
• Online research survey with Councils. However, during the conduct of the first two parts of the research it became clear that qualitative rather than quantitative feedback was necessary. Therefore the research method was revised to teledepth interviews with local government partners to Living Links who have over a sustained period demonstrated various levels of commitment to the ideals of the collaboration. (namely the cities of Monash, Whitehorse, Maroondah, Greater Dandenong, Casey, Knox, Frankston, Bayside, Kingston, and the Shire of Yarra Ranges.)

Ms Rogers showed a good deal of interest in this current research, verified that she considered it to be a legitimate adaptation and further exploration of her own research findings, and she agreed to act as an adviser for this research project.
2.2 Literature Review – Some relevant references and readings

The literature review of other related research studies and published articles was undertaken to provide context and background information for this project at the planning and scoping stage.

The primary purposes of undertaking a literature search relating to the research topic were to ensure:

- that this research project would add to the knowledge pool and understanding of the topic; and
- that the project method proposed for this project would provide new knowledge or useful validation of existing knowledge ie: it would not be ‘re-inventing the wheel’ or exploring a hypothesis that had already been partly or fully proven or disproven.

The use of search facilities on the internet makes it relatively easy to identify a large number of documents that may have some general relevance to the topic being researched – that being to establish and explore factors that influence and enable local authorities to participate in partnerships or collaborative projects, particularly in Australian political frameworks.

An initial search used the Google search facility with combinations of the following terms:

- NRM / Natural Resource Management
- Inter-Council / Council
- Environmental
- Collaboration
- Australia.

The search was deliberately confined to Australian publications and/or case studies that involve collaborations of councils for natural resource management outcomes, as many of the drivers and inhibitors to NRM collaboration are embedded in our uniquely Australian political structures and the often poorly-defined division of responsibilities between the Australian and Victorian Governments, local government and regional NRM bodies.

The Literature search also identified several published reports which provided background information and helped inform the research topic and method for this study. A selection of the more relevant published studies are summarised below:

**NSW Department of Local Government. 2007.**

*A Guidance paper: Collaboration and partnerships between councils.*

The paper is an analysis of the structures and conditions that affect collaboration between local government in Australian conditions, but not specific to Natural Resource Management programs such as Living Links. The paper reinforces the commonly agreed motives for a local government to pursue collaboration in delivery of a range of services and activities with other councils. These include: more cost effective operations and achieving economies of scale by planning and delivering services for larger groups at a lower unit cost; improving prospects of adopting innovative approaches; and ‘cutting red tape’ or reducing resource-intensive bureaucratic or administrative processes.

The focus of the paper is on helping councils to identify which areas of their business might benefit from collaboration. It discusses some case study examples including selected strategic alliances among councils, and the ROC (Regions of Councils) model some of which date back to the mid 1970s in NSW and have developed in other States since then.

The paper supports the view that successful collaborations are likely to feature common elements which will contribute to their success including:

- They are driven by positive and strong leadership
- They benefit from effective governance in their processes and protocols
- They feature opportunities for inclusive and participative decision-making
- They have a clear and realistic focus on the costs of participating in the collaboration and the benefits of doing so, and are able to readily identify and articulate these
- They can identify and accept that the members of the collaboration may have political differences, and can manage these differences so they don’t become an obstacle to the collaboration
- They have a strong focus on outcomes and are able to balance and adjust to competing priorities of the member organisations.
Jane Treadwell. Shared Governance and Collaboration. 2007. EDUCAUSE Australasia

This is a short paper that attempts to identify a governance model that government agencies such as the Department of Victorian Communities might use to establish and service collaborative projects among councils.

It proposes that the key elements required are leadership, a process or workflow approach which removes barriers to collaborative behaviour and therefore creates the new (organisational) behaviours.

The paper is a fairly simplistic top-down overview from a centralised government perspective with little discussion of examples or details to support its theoretical propositions.


This paper observes that decision-making regimes in natural resource management are changing with growing demand for more interests to be represented; and for authority and power to be devolved to accommodate more community participation. It proposes the need for changes in the design of traditional NRM institutions to better facilitate collaborative NRM.


This article written for the Institute for Environment and Natural Resources by researchers at the University of Wyoming, USA in 1998 presents an overview and collation of several key principles of collaborative natural resource management drawn from the literature over the previous two decades – 1980s and 1990s.

It also used primary research to build on this information base and propose eleven general guidelines for planning a collaborative process. Whilst written more than a decade ago, and relating to an environment and subject matter somewhat removed from the current study, this article demonstrates that the logic and desirability of producing a base framework or checklist to assist in the planning, development and/or evaluation of a collaborative endeavour has existed for some time.

Its eleven guidelines bear some resemblance to the elements of successful collaboration identified by other authors since, and adapted in the studies and applications by Nina Rogers and Dr Rebekah Brown.

In summary, these guidelines include:

- Each collaborative process should be tailored to meet the specific needs of its stakeholders, and those stakeholders should be given the opportunity to take part in process design.
- Inclusion of all interested parties and stakeholders should take precedence over concerns about management group size.
- Anyone can initiate a process but a perceived bias introduced by stakeholder initiation must be overcome so that all stakeholders consider it fair and inclusive.
- A facilitator who is considered by all interests as being fair and competent will improve the chances of the success of the collaboration.
- The chosen facilitator’s role should be clearly understood and agreed.
- The organiser of a potential collaborative process should determine the most appropriate form of collaboration for the situation.
- Groups with polarised interest and potential for high levels of conflict will require more resources (funding) to support the collaborative process.
- Collaborative groups operating in a community setting should develop good lines of communication with the public and its community leaders.

The article also discusses the concept of power dynamics. For example the political power of the collaborative group can be a challenge to the local power structure. Possible apathy toward involvement in collaborative processes, and the high demand on members’ time means there is potential for domination by prominent interest groups. Some members may find their interests are better served outside the collaborative process and power imbalances may evolve.

There are many observations and learnings embedded in this work which have relevance and applications for Living Links.
2.3 Conclusions from discussions with project advisers and literature review

The conversations with project advisers, and the readings outlined in this literature review provide sound background and support information for this current research project. It is apparent that across various political regimes and industry sectors there is fairly universal acceptance of the need for and the benefit of acting collaboratively for better environmental outcomes, than would be achieved by agencies working alone in silos or with limited interaction with other agencies.

Notwithstanding this, the costs can be seen to outweigh the perceived benefits of the collaboration by various potential collaborators if they are inclined to focus on tangible and immediate or short-term benefits and outcomes. And these costs are not always quantifiable and tangible, but may be costs of compromise such as a foregoing of independence, self-sufficiency or self-determination.

The concept of successful collaboration being reliant on strong and objective leadership, and possibly supported by a respected and accepted facilitator are generally acknowledged; but the challenge of finding and engaging a facilitator with suitable objectivity and levels of acceptance among the group is clearly more difficult than might be imagined.

Agencies at the local and regional level, and funding organisations at the State and National level will typically employ a mix of people within their organisations – some whose natural inclination will be to encourage and enable collaborative activities; and conversely others who will not readily see the benefits of working actively with other agencies and whose inclination will be to hinder or stifle efforts to collaborate.

A large part of initiating organisational change requires astute observation to recognise the stiflers and the motives or reasons behind their counter-collaborative attitudes. It may also require creativity and perseverance to influence them and gain their support to pursue collaborative endeavours.
3. Research Method

3.1 Project Objectives

The project method was defined by applying program logic to the hypothesis to test the assumptions embedded in it.

The hypothesis of the research project contends that Living Links has managed to develop a successful model of NRM collaboration among agencies and councils that defines a shared objective and commitment. By analysing the factors and characteristics of Living Links that make it ‘successful’, and identifying a set of enablers and a set of barriers to effective NRM collaboration, the project can provide guidance or advice in the form of recommendations, and a model or tool-kit for other groupings of agencies wishing to achieve collaboration of this type.

The research objectives of the study are to:

- Determine if Living Links is generally considered by its stakeholders to be a successful collaboration and understand the factors that they believe contribute to its success.
- Test whether the enabling factors and barriers to the Living Links collaboration are also experienced by other organisations in other collaborations.
- Gain an understanding of the role that councils feel they play in Natural Resource Management and ways they may better deliver this role through collaborative approaches.
3.2 The Program Logic

The program logic sequence, the identified assumptions and the related research project activities are summarised in the following table:

Key Research questions:
- To what degree is Living Links generally considered to be a successful NRM collaboration?
- Are the factors identified in the literature search as drivers or enablers to successful collaboration present in Living Links and attributable to its success?
- Are the factors identified in the literature search as barriers to successful collaboration absent or being managed effectively to be attributable to Living Links’ success?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research method:</th>
<th>Participants:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal (small group) interview undertaken by objective survey consultant (from Wallis Consulting Group)</td>
<td>Representatives from three NRM agencies who are current partners in Living Links – Melbourne Water, South East Water and Parks Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal (small group) interview undertaken by objective survey consultant (from Wallis Consulting Group)</td>
<td>Representatives from two consultancies who were engaged by Living Links to write Phase 2 of the Living Links Master Plan – Sharon Sykes from Sykes Consulting; and Peter Haack and Sarah Ancell from Urbis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal (small group) interview undertaken by objective survey consultant (from Wallis Consulting Group)</td>
<td>Representatives from two other NRM collaborations involving local government – the Association of Bayside Municipalities (comprising 10 municipal Councils abutting Port Phillip Bay); and South East Councils Climate Change Alliance (comprising 8 Councils pursuing collaborative strategies to address climate change impacts).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teledepth (qualitative telephone) interviews undertaken by objective survey consultant (from Wallis Consulting Group)</td>
<td>Representatives from the ten Councils who are current partners in Living Links – Bayside, Kingston, Whitehorse, Frankston, Monash, Knox, Yarra Ranges, Maroondah, Greater Dandenong, and Casey.</td>
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Secondary Research question:
*Can we draw some conclusions from the Living Links study that could provide guidance or advice in the form of a model or tool-kit for other groupings of agencies wishing to achieve collaboration of this type in NRM projects?*

*What form should such a model or tool-kit take?*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research method:</th>
<th>Participants:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal group meeting facilitated by Project Coordinator</td>
<td>Project Control Group comprising Jane Brodie (City of Greater Dandenong), Nadine Gaskell (City of Knox), Kirstyn Lee (DSE) and Viv Charalambous (PPWCMA).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The City of Greater Dandenong contracted the services of Wallis Consulting Group Pty Ltd to undertake the survey components. Wallis’ consultants explored the Key Research questions in the above table by means of personal interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire so that all participants are asked the same questions and the method is repeatable in future studies if required.
3.3 Two Interview Phases

The research findings are qualitative in nature. Nearly all the collaborators in Living Links participated in this study, so this is essentially a census of the key players but numerical data has not been collected. As such, the consultants have reported the ‘flavour’ of the responses offered by the various participants in their summary of each research question. Information was captured in two discrete phases.

First series of Interviews – Major Collaborators

The first series of interviews was conducted with major collaborators and also the consultants engaged in developing the Living Links Master Plan:

- Some of these organisations own or have a vested interest in land and water assets as affected by the Master Plan – Parks Victoria, Melbourne Water, South East Water and the PPWCMA.
- Other research participants are peak bodies for councils, namely:
  - the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) which facilitates a major and enduring NRM collaboration – the Association of Bayside Municipalities (ABM); and
  - the South East Councils Climate Change Alliance (SECCCA) – a project-based collaboration of councils operating in the same area as Living Links.
- Two consulting firms that have been instrumental in developing the Living Links Master Plan – Urbis and Sykes Consulting – also participated. They provided objective comparison between Living Links and several other local government-based collaborations they had been exposed to through their work on a range of other consultancy projects in recent years.

These interviews established the views of Living Links from the perspective of some of its regional-scale beneficiaries, ie the organisations that might benefit from Councils working together and with their own agencies more effectively.

Second series of Interviews – Living Links Councils

The second series of interviews was conducted with representatives of the ten Councils in the Living Links area - all are financial contributors and partners in Living Links. The Councils are: Bayside City Council, Casey City Council, Frankston City Council, Greater Dandenong City Council, Kingston City Council, Maroondah City Council, Knox City Council, Monash City Council, Whitehorse City Council and Yarra Ranges Shire Council.

These interviews established the views of Living Links from the perspective of Councils, the majority of whom participate because they see benefits in collaborative programs, but in doing so are invariably confronted with challenges and resistance from within their own organisations.

The interviews were conducted over a five month period between October 2010 and March 2011.
4. Consultants Report - Survey Results

The Final Report prepared by Wallis Consulting Group Pty Ltd records the detailed findings from the series of personal interviews and telephone interviews conducted with Living Links partners and case study organisations between October 2010 and March 2011.

Wallis, an appropriately credentialed and certified Market Research company (NCS International Certified AS ISO 20252) was engaged to undertake the survey component of this project to ensure objectivity and validity of the research method and the reporting and interpretation of data.

Wallis final report is reproduced in full in this section of the report.
The findings in this report are qualitative in nature. However, nearly all the major collaborators in the Living Links project participated in this study, therefore while the total number of organisations included is small, it is essentially a census of the key players. Nonetheless, numerical data have not been collected and themes and ideas are presented here.
1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Living Links is an alliance of councils and natural resource management agencies (NRM) which are working together to protect and connect greenspace and other natural assets in south east Melbourne. The alliance has been in place for six years and is currently developing a Master Plan for area managed. The Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority (PPWCMA) was the key instigator of the collaboration and provides support and secretarial services to it. Wallis Consulting Group was commissioned to review the collaboration as it reaches a critical phase in its life not only to assist the collaboration in the future, but also to identify the success factors for any collaboration in order to share this information with other would-be collaborations.

In depth interviews were conducted either face to face or by telephone with representatives of the key collaborating agencies and the councils participating in Living Links.

With respect to this review’s objectives, the key findings are:

- Determine that Living Links is a successful collaboration and understand the factors contributing to this success;
- Test whether the enabling factors and barriers to success are shared by other collaborators and in other collaborations

  - Living Links is considered to be a successful collaboration by councils and all collaborators believe it has the potential to succeed in its implementation phase;
  - The factors contributing to its success and of all successful collaborations are thought to be:
    - Having a clear focus on the objectives of the collaboration and keeping this focus
    - Having organisational objectives that fall in line with the objectives of the collaboration
    - Having a driving individual or group of individuals (a champion) to ensure things happen
    - Members see greater benefits from collaborating than from taking individual action – eg the whole is greater than the sum of the parts
    - Get runs on the board early, communicate success and celebrate
    - Trust between collaborators that they will do their part
    - Reasonable degree of equality between collaborators
    - Patience
    - Engage the broader community and ensure it endorses the programme
• Collaborations fail when these factors are not present, particularly where objectives change and where there is no clear and consistent vision. It is also very important to have ongoing support from a champion. In the case of Living Links, there is general agreement that the role of PPWCMA is pivotal to its success. Many collaborations have failed when either the instigator or key underwriter of a programme has withdrawn from it.

**Gain an understanding of the role councils feel they play in Natural Resource Management (NRM) and ways they deliver this role.**

• The councils participating in the Living Links collaboration have very different approaches to Natural Resource Management (NRM) related to their size, geography and the philosophical stance of council. Some councils manage NRM in an ad hoc manner and others have fully integrated council-wide plans with NRM departments responsible for their implementation. Generally the greater the commitment to NRM, the greater the commitment to Living Links. However, even the most committed participants need evidence to persuade their councils to continue to support and fund participation.

Based on these findings we recommend:

• Ensuring that the goals and objectives of the Living Links programme continue and are articulated clearly on a regular basis to participants – this is particularly important in the implementation phase as different people may need to represent their organisations in order to enact the plan

• It is important for PPWCMA to continue to support the programme by providing a project team. It is also important to ensure that members of this team are able to hand over smoothly to others should they leave the project or the organisation

• Setting in place a mechanism to ensure that the key decision makers regarding funding Living Links are aware of the programme and its benefits

• Communicate any completed projects to interested parties on a regular basis

• Develop a communications plan that councils may be able to use that illustrates the benefits of enacting the Living Links plan over developing private lands held in the planning area

• Ensure that councils are equipped with material that will persuade their constituents (particularly those who will do on the ground works) of the benefits of participation in the implementation of the plan

• Put in place contingency plans to cover the possibility that some collaborators may withdraw from the collaboration.
2.0 INTRODUCTION

Living Links is a collaboration of councils and natural resource management agencies (NRM) which are working together to protect and connect greenspace and other natural assets in south east Melbourne. The collaboration includes eleven councils in the south eastern corridor (Bayside, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Knox, Maroondah, Monash, Kingston, Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges), Non-Government Organisations (Bicycle Victoria, Bushwalking Victoria), organisations such as Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, South East Water, Port Phillip & Westernport Catchment Management Authority and the Gould Group, and community groups such as First Friends of Dandenong Creek and indigenous community groups (the Boon Wurrung, Bunerong and Wurundjeri peoples).

The first phase of the collaboration has resulted in the production of a draft Master Plan. The project will move into a new phase of implementation in 2011.

Now in its sixth year, it is thought that the collaboration is still working well together given its longevity. It is the relationship forged between the parties and the reasons for its resilience and apparent success that are the subjects of the research project, not Living Links. The overall aim, therefore, is to understand whether the collaborators and their advisers believe that the Living Links collaboration is successful and the reasons for this in order to inform other collaborations in due course.

2.1 THE OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Determine that Living Links is a successful collaboration and understand the factors contributing to this success;
- Test whether the enabling factors and barriers to success are shared by other collaborators and in other collaborations;
- Gain an understanding of the role councils feel they play in Natural Resource Management (NRM) and ways they deliver this role.
3.0 METHODOLOGY

The project involved interviewing respondents from key stakeholder organisations face to face or by telephone. The key agencies and collaborative organisations interviewed were:

- Melbourne Water
- Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV)
- Parks Victoria
- Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority (PPWCMA) (note respondent was not involved in the day to day running of the programme, but a senior manager)
- South East Councils Climate Change Alliance (SECCCA)
- South East Water
- Sykes Consulting
- Urbis (noting that representatives of Sykes and Urbis Consulting were interviewed simultaneously).

Interviews commenced on 25th October 2010. The final interview was conducted on 4th February 2011 with PPWCMA as Wallis Consulting believed it to be an omission if the organisation was not included and the project team agreed. The discussion guideline used for these interviews is appended. Interviews were conducted by project director, Jayne Van Souwe.

A second tranche of interviews was conducted with councils. Initially it had been planned to gather information from these collaborators by means of an online survey. However, the initial interviews with key agencies showed that the issues facing councils were quite different than those facing them and that gathering quantitative information would be less useful than gaining more insight. Thus a programme of telephone interviewing was recommended with the Living Links representative and other interested parties in each council. Interviews commenced on 4th February and finished on 10th March, 2011. These interviews were conducted by the project director assisted by consultants Ben Bishop and Nisha Ali – all of Wallis Consulting Group. The interview guide for these interviews is also appended. One question was sent to respondents for them to give an organisational rating – the only piece of quantitative data collected in the study. Unfortunately, only a handful of councils provided the ratings and they are not reported here.
The councils that were included in the study were:

- Bayside
- Casey
- Greater Dandenong
- Frankston
- Kingston
- Knox
- Monash
- Maroondah
- Whitehorse
- Yarra Ranges

It is worth noting that the interviewing period was more protracted than originally anticipated. There were several reasons for this:

- Interviewing occurred in the lead up to Christmas and key agencies were the first to be interviewed, requiring the agreement and sometimes inclusion of senior staff. Nonetheless, all agencies approached co-operated willingly.

- The original interviewing plan excluded PPWCMA, however interviews with key stakeholders revealed the importance of the Authority to the entire programme and on recommendation of the Wallis Consulting Team the organisation was interviewed after other key stakeholders.

- The methodology changed for council interviews and given the nature of the interviewing was more time-consuming for respondents than the planned online survey, interviewing was delayed until after the Christmas break. Many councils agreed to interview immediately, however it is a measure of commitment to the Living Links project that all were willing to be interviewed and one did so immediately after returning from leave. However, staff changes at Glen Eira meant that it was the only council unable to respond. At the time of writing this report there was no active council representative participating in the collaboration.
4.0 DETAILED FINDINGS

Information was captured in two discrete phases. The first series of interviews was conducted with major collaborators and the architects of the overall Master Plan, namely organisations owning or having a vested interest in land and water affected by the Living Links Master Plan (Parks Victoria, South East Water, Melbourne Water). In addition, the Municipal Association of Victoria, being a peak body for councils and the South East Councils Climate Change Alliance, being a collaboration of councils in itself with a number of projects operating in the same geographic area as Living Links, were consulted. Two consulting firms that had been instrumental in helping to draft the Master Plan, Urbis and Sykes Consulting, were interviewed to gain their views. Finally, as the instigator of the project, a senior representative of Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority (PPWCMA) who was not directly involved in day to day management of the project was interviewed.

In the second phase representatives of the eleven participating councils (and interested parties within them) were interviewed. This report details the findings for each of the two phases and then draws overall conclusions. The three sections of the report are thus:

- Key agencies and collaborative organisations
- Councils
- Summary of findings overall

4.1 KEY AGENCIES AND COLLABORATIVE ORGANISATIONS

All the key agencies approached were interviewed and went to considerable lengths to ensure that they participated. Given the seniority of the staff who were interviewed and their limited availability, this demonstrates their commitment to the alliance.

4.1.1 The importance of collaborations

All agencies had experience of other collaborations in addition to Living Links. The key reason for participating in any collaboration is to achieve more in aggregate than could be achieved individually. For a collaboration to be considered, the objectives need to be in keeping with the corporation’s own objectives, that is, they are generally not entered into for purely altruistic purposes.

“It needs to align with our strategic direction”

Collaborations mentioned by respondents (either because they were aware of them and/or members of them), included:

- Spirit of the Bunyip
- Spirit of the Yarra (Yarra4Life)
- Biosphere
- Southern Brown Bandicoot
- Grow West
The keys to a successful collaboration are seen to be:

- Having a clear focus on the objectives of the collaboration and keeping this focus
- Having organisational objectives that fall in line with the objectives of the collaboration
- Having a driving individual or group of individuals (a champion) to ensure things happen
- Members see greater benefits from collaborating than from taking individual action – eg the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This not only extends to direct action related to the programme but the ability to generate additional momentum, funding etc over and above the original objectives
- Get runs on the board early, communicate success and celebrates it
- Trust between collaborators that they will do their part
- Reasonable degree of equality between collaborators
- Patience – particularly where the environment is concerned, action takes many years
- Make sure that the broader community endorses the programme (community may range from a specialist community to the general public as appropriate from the successful carriage of the project or programme)

Examples of successful collaborations included Spirit of the Bunyip, Grow West and the Association of Bayside Municipalities. One respondent summarised the success of the ABM as being:

*This involves 10 councils around Port Phillip Bay. It's been in existence since the late seventies. The focus is on coastal management. The common theme is the Bay. They get together to talk about common issues and challenges. It provides an opportunity for people to connect – it gives a network or people they can talk with. It works because people are passionate about the Bay and conservation. Each council has two delegates, a councillor and a person from the council. The group comes together every two months. It has a central administrator to organise meetings and follow up. Money for projects tends to come from state or federal grant money. They usually don't involve all the councils but usually more than one will get together although one usually
Collaborations fail if the above characteristics are not present and if people at the right level are not involved. An example of one such failure was considered to be the Regional Pest and Animal Strategy:

“This is struggling because of expectations. They have put a book together about pest plants and animals and got a specialist consultant to prepare it, but it doesn’t say what to do”

Another failure was thought to be Habitat 141:

“This was too big. Even the State Government couldn’t deal with it. The White Paper on Land and Biodiversity was too broad in scope – it couldn’t be translated into tangible action”

These features are not common to Australian collaborations alone. A visitor from Canada observed collaborations had failed in that country for the same reasons. The example given was for a project run a few years ago by Parks Canada:

“Where have the collaborations failed? People don’t feel needed, false expectations were set and there were some personal agendas, but most of all, they didn’t have a common vision”

4.1.2 Councils’ involvement in collaborations

Stakeholders had a number of views about why councils participate in the Living Links collaboration. It is assumed by all that they must see similar benefits to the key collaborators, that is, that the project has mutual objectives that are more likely to be met by a collaboration than through individual organisations or councils acting alone.

“It gives the backing to do things they couldn’t do alone. It’s not just altruism. Environmental outcomes are corridor-based, therefore the nature of the work is the driver of the collaboration”

Some respondents felt that councils would also benefit from networking opportunities and the ability to see what other councils are doing. On a more cynical note, respondents noted that environmental officers move between councils quite regularly.
so it is probably in their interest to keep across developments in case they change job!

Another key reason for participation was thought to be access to funding.

“Parks Vic and Melbourne Water have grants available and councils compete for them. This collaboration can take the competition out of it and the waste of time and effort in fighting each other. This project can articulate its goals clearly and is easy to get funding for as the benefits are obvious. It’s like a Tatts syndicate – you have a better chance of winning if you’re in it together”

4.1.3 The Living Links collaboration

Respondents joined the Living Links collaboration for the same reason as other collaborations – it fits with their corporate ethos.

“Living Links ticks all the right environmental boxes”.

It has maintained the same set of objectives over the years – it has not been distracted and either taken on too much or narrowed its focus down.

It differs from some collaborations because of its scope – it focuses around a catchment rather than a more localised area or project, and although it is a Natural Resource Management project, there are many elements to the plan that give it wide appeal.

“Conservation doesn’t recognise boundaries. The CMA is the Authority that moves across public and private landholders. It’s exactly what it should be doing”

The scope of the project, backed by a major CMA, is thought to give it credibility with all levels of government and attract funding that might not be available for smaller projects. Thus it provides access to funding that might otherwise be more difficult to gain.

“A coordinated programme with tangible benefits and the backing of the CMA is much easier for governments to fund”

The breadth of the project and the number of collaborators offers a wider network of interested parties that all collaborators saw as a benefit of membership.

“It allows networking with other organisations. There is always a reasonable turnout. It’s a good forum to float ideas outside of Living Links – this is a big
The project management is widely praised as being excellent and a key reason why the momentum is maintained. Likewise the willing backing of the CMA and other major agencies is acknowledged.

“"The rapport is excellent. There is a manager for the programme and everyone agrees this is what is needed.”"

While the CMA itself is very keen to ensure that it is not heavy handed (noting that it was the last interview conducted and that personnel were extremely cautious about “tainting” these results), there is recognition by most respondents that it was necessary for the CMA to take the initiative and establish Living Links. Its action in doing this and in supporting it are considered to be entirely appropriate:

“"Living Links is unique because it has the involvement of the CMA rather than just the councils. The CMA has provided the resources and also their independence. The CMA provides a useful interface with Melbourne Water and Parks Victoria because they are on an equal footing.”"

The CMA supports four major collaborations and notes that its involvement in these is not entirely altruistic. They have enabled the Authority to generate funding and to raise awareness of its activities and its profile. It has also enabled the Authority to build strong working relationships with up to 30 key organisations that would otherwise have been difficult for it. The high profile and exciting projects have also allowed the Authority to talk about less exciting or more difficult projects too.

Although people attending meetings have different levels of experience, respondents believe that everyone is treated equally at meetings and this has led to a great sense of camaraderie:

“"All are equal around the table and there is a sense of camaraderie. Members go to more senior people away from the table but they are encouraged to bring people with them. (Senior People from PPWCMA, Parks etc) are passionate and there is a strength there”"
The project has already attracted some corporate funding and there have been some activities to use to demonstrate success

“They are good at celebrating and recognising achievement. They’re very excited about what they’ve done”

The following verbatim comment summarises the rationale for being part of Living Links:

“We choose to be involved in Living Links on the basis of:

- Our corporate plan and strategic priorities – looking for projects that fit with these (Living Links ticks the box automatically!)
- The catchment, water management and the environment are part of our business
- Meeting our statutory requirements
- We own pockets of land and could do things alone, but they’re better if they’re linked
- It allows us to be in discussions with other organisations – to influence them and learn from them.”

4.1.4 Is Living Links a success?

Respondents were hesitant to declare Living Links a success given the stage of the project, with most saying it has all the requirements to be successful (as outlined earlier), but that the implementation phase would be the real test for this programme. Having said this, the programme is clearly well positioned and has all the pre-requisites for success if the status quo can be maintained into the implementation phase.

One very positive sign for the future is the willingness with which private organisations have participated so far. This has been a surprise to some respondents. Feedback from participating organisations suggests that they see a big return for a relatively small investment. Funds did not dry up during the Global Financial Crisis.

“I’ve been surprised that they’re (business) very genuine in partnerships. They often don’t want too much from us and they’re much freer in providing money as long as they get some marketing collateral from it. Nearly all of them come back once they’ve done something. They usually dip their toes in the water with a small project then come back with the big money. It takes two to three years”
Nonetheless, funding is an issue and while the CMA is currently willing and able to underwrite the programme, having ongoing funding from either the State or Federal government would give the project much more long term certainty.

One respondent summarised these views as:

"It's on the verge of being successful. If it stopped today you could still say it has done a good job, but it's at the precipice of going up another level. If the Master Plan happens and we get the appropriate statistics then it's really quite exciting and would be enormously successful."

4.1.5 How could the collaboration be improved?

The programme itself is thought to be good. It has some potential downfalls moving forwards. In particular, the issue of the people who represent their organisation was raised. Some worried that representatives are not senior enough to ensure that sufficient funding is made available or that the will to contribute will continue when the Master Plan moves into its implementation phase:

"When Living Links was established it asked Senior Managers within organisations to get involved. It soon got devolved to people at the operational level. The key issues facing Living Links is the seniority of staff and the danger that executive management isn’t involved. So far we’ve been planning, but if the agencies are required to do stuff it will only happen if the staff representing them are senior enough to push things through."

Others showed a concern that having people who are too senior may mean that little would be achieved:

"They need to be careful it doesn’t get too top heavy. At the moment you can talk to people who are on the ground and can get things done."

It may also be important to include other areas of council, particularly those involved in economic development and planning to demonstrate the benefits of the collaboration to them. On balance, respondents were saying that all levels within collaborators’ organisations need to be involved in some way and that the current project team is very good at making sure this happens.

Most respondents mentioned the imminent amalgamation of PPWCMA into Melbourne Water and held mixed feelings about the impact this may have on Living Links. Some thought that Melbourne Water would be less committed and may not support the programme to the same extent as the CMA and others had no such
concerns. Nonetheless, a key strength of the programme to date has been that the CMA is an independent body and this independence would be lost following the amalgamation.

Several respondents commented that there are differing levels of commitment and that some members of the collaboration put much more effort in than do others. The role of the CMA and the project manager, in particular, in keeping the momentum of the programme going was applauded and while this was thought to be a positive thing for the programme, the loss of the project manager was also a potential concern, unless someone with equal dedication and enthusiasm could be found.

“There are a few passengers at the moment. Perhaps we should take more ownership, a rotating chair, and responsibility for putting out the agenda? To be truly collaborating we need to all take more time and effort”

This issue may intensify during implementation as those who are less committed are less likely to push their organisations to act in the event that additional funding or other support or action is required. For example, some councils may not approve funding for their particular part of a project while neighbouring councils may do so. If this happens it will cause frustration and will slow the project down. Maintaining momentum may then become a problem:

“A potential barrier (to implementation) is that we will be slow in delivery. Maintaining the focus, persistence, will be important. So we will need to make sure that some things get done each year and show how they relate to the overall plan”

Nonetheless, it is thought that action would continue amongst the willing who would slowly chip away at the project. As one respondent put it:

“This is a very long term programme anyway and it won’t all be done at once”

If a major council pulled out of the collaboration it would still continue but it would make it difficult. While the peak agencies can cajole, most of the work on the ground will be done by councils and their communities. On this latter point, there was some criticism of the lack of community engagement, but most respondents thought it too early to garner community support. The appointment of a manager to the team who is experienced in fund raising, and the public relations elements of the plan are thought to be there to engage the community in the implementation phase.
As mentioned earlier, funding is always an issue and having a state or federal agency providing ongoing funding would relieve the pressure of ensuring that all collaborators contribute and that private funding is raised as well.

Finally, some respondents mentioned the potential pitfall of changes in legislation. At the moment planning and environmental legislation are at cross purposes and each council has the potential to implement by-laws that could cause cross border collaboration to falter. This reinforces the importance of making sure that people at all levels of the collaborators’ organisations are aware of the project to limit the likelihood of this happening.

4.1.6 Summary

The keys to successful collaborations have been identified as:

- Having a clear focus on the objectives of the collaboration and keeping this focus
- Having organisational objectives that fall in line with the objectives of the collaboration
- Having a driving individual or group of individuals (a champion) to ensure things happen
- Members see greater benefits from collaborating than from taking individual action – e.g. the whole is greater than the sum of the parts
- Get runs on the board early, communicate success and celebrate
- Trust between collaborators that they will do their part
- Reasonable degree of equality between collaborators
- Patience
- Make sure that the broader community endorses the programme (community may range from a specialist community to the general public as appropriate from the successful carriage of the project or programme)

These are clearly in place with the Living Links programme. Respondents were hesitant to declare the programme a success as it has yet to move into its implementation phase. All agree that this will provide the greatest test of the programme and the collaboration that has been built to support it.
There is general agreement that the building blocks are in place for successful implementation of the Living Links programme based on the strength and structure of the collaboration. However, several practical obstacles were noted:

- When larger funding allocations are required, more senior people will need to be engaged, particularly in the councils
- Private land may need to be incorporated and this may cause the programme to slow while negotiations are entered into. It may cause the programme to take a political angle which hasn’t happened so far
- All agencies (particularly councils) will need to be committed and stick to their commitments. If one agency is unable to complete its part of a project, this may slow the overall plan down and lead to frustration. This will not stop smaller individual parts of the programme from being implemented however.
- Were the current level of support from PPWCMA cease and/or personnel changes provided a less dedicated team of managers, this could undermine the programme. Related to this, some respondents were concerned about how the programme would be supported once PPWCMA has been amalgamated into Melbourne Water. Some respondents did not foresee Melbourne Water being as enthusiastic about Living Links as the CMA, but others did not share this concern.

Councils are thought to gain the same benefits as other collaborators, namely the ability to network and to gain benefits far greater through collaboration than could be achieved individually.
4.2 COUNCILS

All but one of the councils involved in the collaboration were interviewed.

4.2.1 Natural Resource Management by councils individually & collaboratively

The councils in the Living Links collaboration take very different approaches to Natural Resource Management (NRM) from the ad hoc project by project approach where different areas of council may take the lead depending on the nature of the project, to the highly organised centralised and carefully planned.

The approach taken seems to be underpinned by the geographic characteristics of the LGA and the philosophical stance of council – that is, the more green and open space there is in an LGA, and the more Council values that space as an asset, the more likely it is to have an organised NRM strategy and officers responsible for its implementation.

The NRM task therefore falls to different people in different LGAs. Generally open space planners are involved (in councils that have such personnel) as are people employed in recreation areas. Some councils have specialist environmental officers and even biodiversity units and these take the lead in NRM where they exist.

"We are engaged in a collaborative sustainability accord project that involves managing biodiversity with climate change where we are partnering with adjacent councils like Yarra Ranges and Maroondah, and we are looking at a case by case basis on how to manage biodiversity within a changing climate. We are getting grants for the project from the state government. We also have regular sessions with other councils and discuss issues and, where appropriate, have discussions with the Department of Environment and Sustainability on vegetation. Our bushland team work closely with DPI. I have regular communication with Yarra Ranges and Maroondah on biodiversity, we are all part of a native vegetation group. We have an understanding through Living Links about what is going on in other municipalities."

In every case, councils agreed that NRM requires co-ordination within their own council and with other councils and peak bodies. They are, therefore, involved in a number of collaborations in relation to NRM.

"Councils can collaborate in terms of discussing what approach are you taking, this is what we have been doing and enhancing communication across the board in terms of how we can implement natural vegetation and how other councils are working with developers and a whole range of components of that."
"We are a member of the Association of Bayside Municipalities, that has been a good forum to be involved and informed of what is going on in other bayside municipalities, basically. I guess we are quite unique and have the foreshore frontage. And there are other forums we have been involved in like through Linking People, Spaces, and Parks Victoria, Parks and Leisure Australia. We are also involved in other partnership programmes like with Melbourne University for the research they are doing on micro-bats, so that is a research programme we contribute to and are directly engaged with across Victoria.

With the ABM, there would be a monthly meeting with technical officers and delegates, and every couple of months we would all get together and have a very formal meeting. Our main linkage with other municipalities is through the foreshore and so I think that the relationship we have with other councils with foreshore frontage has been very successful with the ABM forum. However, Living Links is looking specifically at corridors and biodiversity linkages and so it sort of hinges on something very specific rather than general. It is good to have some sort of Master Plan or documentation to go by which is prepared externally."

Many of the key bodies that are involved in NRM collaborations are part of the Living Links collaboration. Therefore, whatever the approach taken by councils, being a member of Living Links is valuable from the networking perspective in NRM, particularly for councils that approach NRM in a more ad hoc way.

4.2.2 What makes a successful collaboration?

Councils held similar views to other members of the collaboration about the key success factors for any collaborative effort. Nonetheless, councils have a slightly different perspective on these and the order is somewhat different:

- Having shared goals and objectives
- Having a driving individual member or group of individuals (a champion) to ensure things happen and financial support
- Having the right people from each of the collaborators’ organisations and equality between them, however it is considered important that senior management in each organisation support the collaboration even if they are not the regular representative
- Trust that all collaborators will do their part
- Having a clear focus on the objectives of the collaboration and keeping this focus
- Members see greater benefits from collaborating than from taking individual action – e.g. the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This not only extends to direct action related to the programme but the ability to generate additional momentum, funding etc over and above the original objectives
• Get runs on the board early, communicate success and celebrate it

• Patience – this is particularly difficult where funding is tight and it is a reason that the previous point is so important – if representatives can prove the worth of the collaboration it is easier to generate ongoing support for participation.

• Make sure that the broader community endorses the programme (in the case of councils, it is extremely important that community groups as well as residents support the collaboration and are aware of it – particularly in NRM projects as they will be involved in implementation)

"The Living Links document has provided us the opportunity for us to include a lot of the strategic plans that we have done over time and also some things that we would like to generate and put it into a regional framework and even a state government framework as well. By us having it in documents like Living Links, a lot of our initiatives and strategies like [project name] are incorporated in those plans, that has provided us with strategic support to apply for funding."

"Being able to work on something that's going to benefit both parties, or multiple parties."

"We have to be able to translate the intangible to tangible. To be able to leverage funds, we need something solid, based on research and facts to show our directors and senior managers how it is relevant to our particular council."

"It's not just about tree-planting. It is also about recreational uses, getting people into these areas."

4.2.3 Barriers against a collaboration

Councils will not enter collaborations if there is no benefit in it. That is they will not join a philosophical alliance, unless it can return some benefit, which may simply be the ability to network with people or organisations that may be useful for other purposes.

Councils may withdraw from collaborations if they are required to contribute funding that they cannot justify. This is why it is important to them to be able to demonstrate the value of participating in the collaboration and tangible benefits, such as projects that have resulted from the collaboration are well regarded.

In general terms, councils noted that they had seen collaborations fail where:

• No individual or body takes responsibility for keeping it alive or where the opposite applies and one agency takes total ownership of it

• Where communications are poor between the collaborators

• Organisations allow their own political agendas to surface which are not in keeping with the overall objectives of the collaboration
Where organisations want to get results quickly, or more quickly than the collaboration is able to move

- The objectives and focus change

Many of these ideas are summed up in the following examples:

"Too many times government authorities initiate a programme, so this is what we have to do and two years later they are changing policies, changing directions, changing funding and priorities. An example is the Greenhouse Climate Change action group. It is an important issue so a group was started with a collaboration of different councils on greenhouse actions rather than individual councils. Two years later when it was reviewed they said "yes it is successful, but we can't fund it anymore". The key to it is ongoing support from the state government authority."

"The Regional Pest Animal Group a few years ago, it fell over because people had other work going on. Living Links is much larger than that, there is more drive to keep it going."

### 4.2.4 Why are councils members of the Living Links Collaboration?

Councils are attracted to the Living Links collaboration because it gives short term benefits like networking opportunities, access to funding and cross border projects, while also keeping a long-term NRM focus.

"Being part of the programme has been really useful as it helps leverage funding, for example, Melbourne Water can see that we are committed and councils are willing to give us some extra funds that allows us to carry out some larger scale projects than we may have had the opportunity to do otherwise."

"Living Links brings different organisations together, that’s one of the best things of the project. What we have got out of Living Links is working more closely with our neighbouring councils, and also aided us to get some extra grant money that we didn’t get before. What it does is I suppose it creates interactions with officers at different levels with natural resource responsibilities who you might not meet necessarily in other forums."

"One of the greatest assets of the programme is the networking that goes on between the councils at the steering committee level and the opportunity to find out about the projects happening at other municipalities, to see if there are opportunities to work in collaboration or partnership. We haven’t had the chance to form collaboration with any councils particularly through Living Links but there could always be an opportunity."
Councils have a demonstrated need to look after their own local environs and realise that their own environment is affected by their neighbouring council’s actions. Being in collaboration makes it easier to work together as well as to know what is happening.

"Working closely with adjoining councils especially because our lands are adjoining. If we are doing something positive, for instance, if we are looking at weed control, if we are looking at controlling a specific species that is not being controlled by our neighbours then it would be problematic as individually we would not be able to achieve what we want to. So collaborating with adjoining managers is important in order to have success for what you are doing."

"Being able to set up a regional vision around the Dandenong catchment rather than looking at it within municipality boundaries."

"Getting a larger strategic approach to how natural resources are managed regionally is also important."

"We are developing an open space strategy that would influence our whole area and so the principles of Living Links has been included in that draft."

"Dandenong Creek flows through several municipalities. Lot of the issues that we have in our council are caused by further upstream, fitting it into a broader picture of catchment management is useful for management within our own municipality. In your municipality you focus on your areas of operation but by having the regional approach, you then see how your actions are fitting in, there is a close connectivity on the ground, understanding with what others are doing."

Some councils see Living Links as an ingredient in their triple-bottom line accounting, but nearly all of them have some specific project in mind that fits in with the Master Plan.

"Dandenong Creek flows through the hub of our municipality, we would be mad not to get involvement because one of the major focus of Living Links is to improve the creek."

The level of involvement in Living Links varies greatly depending on the proportion of the LGA that is covered by the catchment. Generally those that have a small area in the catchment are less involved than those completely inside the catchment boundaries.

Irrespective of the area covered by the Living Links Master Plan, councils can see the benefits in being part of a greater plan and this can give their own projects (even if small) added status.
In some instances, being part of a larger collaboration can "shame" councillors into taking action that they may not otherwise have done.

"A lot of the other councils are involved for the Dandenong creek and other creeks which cut through the heart of their municipalities, that is probably the main drive or gut of the programme but it feels like the foreshores are not a main consideration, that is why we are connected to the programme. [council] has had some short term work scheme through Living Links for their foreshore, and that's our neighbouring foreshore. They had been quite involved, I don't know why we haven't been so involved. But maybe that is not a drawback for PPWCMA, we had a few representatives and not someone continually involved so maybe we had missed opportunities that had been available to us perhaps clearly at one point and not taken up."

The following quote sums much of this sentiment up:

"Time commitment, like attending the meetings, is one of the costs of being part of this programme, but the benefits outweigh the costs. At the same time attending those meetings allows you to network with other agencies like Melbourne Water, Port Phillip CMA. It is hard to see any negative for being part of Living Links. There are costs in terms of time but if you look at it overall there are so many positive things such as regional improvement, local opportunities for local improvement, opportunities to leverage funding from federal and state governments, development of a Master Plan, opportunities for collaboration...there are so many benefits"

### 4.2.5 Is Living Links a success?

There is a general agreement that Living Links has been quite successful as a regional Master Plan and a number of projects that have been undertaken would not have occurred in the absence of the Collaboration. In addition, the Collaboration has brought people from different councils together to think about how they are connected to each other and what they can do to manage those connections better.

"A regional Master Plan is huge and I don't think it could have been possible without Living Links."

However, as the programme moves from the planning to the implementation stage, councils identified a number of potential problems. Firstly, reflecting the views expressed by other stakeholders, is the need to ensure that senior managers in organisations are involved as they will be the ones who will need to provide funding and support to see project implemented. Ensuring that the programme has a high profile will be particularly important, and councils do not think the programme has this currently.
"Living Links would be successful - it is on the right track. But there is a risk involved at this stage, that it is losing its profile and that is no criticism of the people who are involved, but I think its profile could be improved by a biannual reporting exercise to the senior management, involve councillors to unpack the relationship between the big picture vision and on the ground levels of budget, responsibility and the relevant departments that need to be involved to make this vision happen."

Another potential problem is being able to continue to generate funds. Councils that have not benefitted from funding already find it harder to convince their councillors to fund the programme now and if and when more funds are required this task will be even harder.

"It hasn't helped us to leverage funding and we have not been seeking any external funds for our other projects because most of our funding is internal. We have projects we are working on, for example, a bike path along the foreshore, so the principles of the Living Links aligns with us in continuing our bike path along the foreshore so that has been useful but we were doing it anyway and that really comes from Parks Victoria initiative about Linkages. So that was something that already existed. So far, there hasn't been any direct short-term benefit."

"Funding would be a large aspect of whether the Master Plan can be implemented or not."

Similarly councils that are less involved in the programme find participation harder to justify.

"Because the collaboration is so large and varied, there are always going to be municipalities that we don't really connect with. We need to be more convinced of the value of the whole project, it's fantastic to collaborate but when it comes to councillors it would come down to what does this mean to our particular council? It becomes more of a political agenda."

"Increasing the fee has caused us to question our involvement. We have a small fund for environmental projects and this needs to be matched by grants."

Some councils mentioned that staff representing councils are constantly changing. So far having a consistent project team supported by PPWCMA has minimised the potential problem, but were this team to change as well, it might cause communications to fail. As it is, some collaborators are unsure as to the projects stage.
"I am not really clear on what the implementation involves...I was calling this a Master Plan and I keep getting corrected that it is not a master plan but a discussion paper. I thought it was a draft Master Plan. Normally when we have a master plan we have a list of actions, a thorough action plan and is that what the implementation is going to be? That's not clear to me. I have got a document in front of me with dot points of what is happening but I am not clear on what we are supposed to be doing."

Most of the councils were concerned about the consequences of other councils failing to enact their parts of the plan or withdrawing from the Collaboration completely. Any withdrawal would weaken the Collaboration and its effectiveness as a tool to leverage action or gain funding.

"Since all councils are involved, there is a peer pressure. When you are selling this in terms of trying to gain funding and identify it as priority project by demonstrating overall commitment to it, if some councils are not involved then it sort of becomes really difficult to obtain resources and then other councils may also decide to pull out acting on peer pressure."

"If a council doesn't act or is not committed any more, obviously it eliminates the total input into the program. I guess the amount of funding would be reduced and that potentially reduces the leverage for further funding."

However, councils believe that some are more critical to the Collaboration than others and that provided the key councils continue, so will the Collaboration.

"It depends on which councils choose not to act. From our perspective if it is Bayside or Port Philip, then they only have a very small part in it whereas if Monash, Casey or Knox who form big components of the catchment, it would be a big factor."

"It depends on the number of councils who decide to pull out, if it is one or two, the programme would still continue. And if those councils are not part of the catchment, then it would not have such a devastating effect."

If councils continue to participate but are slow in implementing their parts of the plan this would be annoying but would not stop the Collaboration.

"Council not acting on the same time-line as others could cause a bit of a lapse or delay the process, but it would not be a serious issue as eventually you would find the right person to get done what needs to be done...and you can't just wake up in the morning and decide not to go ahead, that's not how governmental agencies work."
4.2.6 Recommendations for how Living Links can be improved

Councils were asked how Living Links could be improved. There were some specific suggestions including:

- Regional collaboration and reporting
- Briefing senior managers and decision makers
- Engaging the community, particularly to resolve conflicts of interests eg between land developers and people wanting to conserve the environment.

Many were happy with the Collaboration, however re-iterated the importance of being able to demonstrate the value of participation, particularly in the next, implementation phase of the programme.

"It might be worthwhile recommending this that in making reports that councils are brought together in a regional way, for example Monash might be briefed along with Knox or other adjacent councils with the relevant stakeholders or interested seniors, directors and managers present."

"Being able to present the programme to the councillors or at directorial level in some formal way could really benefit the programme to obtain continued support from the councils."

"Recently they asked us for more money but we were not convinced that we could persuade the rest of our organisation and it could be warranted as a priority considering the other things within our municipality that we need to spend money on."

"We are constantly fighting that battle with our own community and it would be great if Living Links helped us or designed a programme to communicate to our community regarding the value of the foreshore as a natural environment and not as manicured or controlled. We have areas that are good for recreational purposes which is great but we have other areas that we like to keep fairly natural and it is just difficult in communicating that and it would be good to have that support from Living Links to strengthen that, have a document that promote foreshore as a natural asset. Also if Living Links could help out in weed control which is one of the major issues we have."

"It needs to be promoted to the broader community. It would be great to have signage saying 'Another Living Links project'. There should also be a programme talking to kids in schools about Living Links."
4.2.7 Summary of the views of councils

Councils identified the keys to successful collaborations as:

- Having shared goals and objectives
- Having a driving individual member or group of individuals (a champion) to ensure things happen and financial support
- Having the right people from each of the collaborators’ organisations and equality between them, however it is considered important that senior management in each organisation support the collaboration even if they are not the regular representative
- Trust that all collaborators will do their part
- Having a clear focus on the objectives of the collaboration and keeping this focus
- Members see greater benefits from collaborating than from taking individual action – eg the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. This not only extends to direct action related to the programme but the ability to generate additional momentum, funding etc over and above the original objectives
- Get runs on the board early, communicate success and celebrate it
- Patience – this is particularly difficult where funding is tight and it is a reason that the previous point is so important – if representatives can prove the worth of the collaboration it is easier to generate ongoing support for participation
- Make sure that the broader community endorses the programme (in the case of councils, it is extremely important that community groups as well as residents support the collaboration and are aware of it – particularly in NRM projects as they will be involved in implementation).

This list is similar to that generated by major stakeholders and, like them, councils see many benefits from being in the Living Links collaboration.

Councils see the collaboration as a success because the Master Plan could not have been developed without it, nor could some of the projects have been achieved. Nonetheless the best is yet to come as the Master Plan is implemented and councils agree that this will provide the greatest test of the collaboration as Councils struggle to justify providing funding, support and action. This is particularly the case where council’s involvement in the programme is small and/or where the competing needs of private developers and the Master Plan are at odds. While everyone agrees that the recreational needs of the community are important, development and the economic benefits that can accrue may be seen as more important by councillors.
Thus councils noted some potential barriers to successful implementation of Living Links and to the cohesion of the collaboration:

- The need to ensure that key funding decision makers (e.g., senior managers) are involved and support the programme
- The need for projects and other tangible benefits to be available to demonstrate the need to continue participation
- The need to maintain a clear focus and a dedicated and committed project team.

Councils believe that even if some collaborators were to withdraw or not fulfil their obligations the collaboration would continue, but that its potential could be severely impacted if any key councils or stakeholders withdrew.
4.3 SUMMARY

Bringing all the findings together:

- Living Links is considered to be a successful collaboration by council and all collaborators believe it has the potential to succeed in its implementation phase;

- The factors contributing to its success and of all successful collaborations are thought to be:
  - Having a clear focus on the objectives of the collaboration and keeping this focus
  - Having organisational objectives that fall in line with the objectives of the collaboration
  - Having a driving individual or group of individuals (a champion) to ensure things happen
  - Members see greater benefits from collaborating than from taking individual action – eg the whole is greater than the sum of the parts
  - Get runs on the board early, communicate success and celebrate
  - Trust between collaborators that they will do their part
  - Reasonable degree of equality between collaborators
  - Patience
  - Engage the broader community and ensure it endorses the program

- Collaborations fail when these factors are not present, particularly where objectives change and where there is no clear and consistent vision. It is also very important to have ongoing support from a champion. In the case of Living Links, there is general agreement that the role of PPWCMA is pivotal to its success. Many collaborations have failed when either the instigator or key underwriter of a program has withdrawn from it.

- The councils participating in the Living Links collaboration have very different approaches to Natural Resource Management (NRM) related to their size, geography and the philosophical stance of council. Some councils manage NRM in an ad hoc manner and others have fully integrated council-wide plans with NRM departments responsible for their implementation. Generally the greater the commitment to NRM, the greater the commitment to Living Links. However, even the most committed participants need evidence to persuade their councils to continue to support and fund participation.

These findings are summarised in the following table:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Key collaborators</th>
<th>Councils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is LL a success?</td>
<td>• Too early to say – still in planning phase</td>
<td>• Yes, because the Master Plan and selected projects would not have been possible without it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Has endured – likely because of strong project management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success factors</td>
<td>• Individual or champion (ie strong project manager)</td>
<td>• Ability to network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Clear and unwavering focus</td>
<td>• Ability to get projects done that would otherwise not be possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Backing of CMA which is on equal footing with other major collaborators</td>
<td>• Clear and unwavering focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sense of equality for all collaborators</td>
<td>• Good project management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicate and celebrate successes</td>
<td>• Sense of camaraderie of purpose between collaborators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Cross border projects made easier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors underpinning successful collaborations in general</td>
<td>• Need good project management and support</td>
<td>• Benefits of collaboration outweigh the costs of participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Clear objectives</td>
<td>• Need good project management and support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Members need a common goal and belief (or reality) that the sum is greater than the parts</td>
<td>• Clear objectives</td>
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<td>• Get runs on the board early and communicate success to others</td>
<td>• Get runs on the board early and communicate success to others</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Trust between collaborators that all will fulfil their obligations</td>
<td>• Ability to engage constituents</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Patience</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Reasonable degree of equality between collaborators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons collaborations fail</td>
<td>• Lack of commitment from collaborators</td>
<td>• Either no ownership or else one body &quot;hijacks&quot; the collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborators (or their representatives) are at different or unequal status and/or unable to effect action</td>
<td>• Where communications are poor between the collaborators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Political and other agendas intervene</td>
<td>• Political and other agendas intervene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Where collaborators are working at different speeds</td>
<td>• The objectives and focus change</td>
</tr>
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</table>
### Role councils play in NRM

- Need reinforcement as NRM can take a back seat to other matters especially if budgets are tight
- Collaborations are of great benefit, because they can get their own council to act if they can demonstrate that neighbouring councils are acting

### Ways councils deliver NRM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ways councils deliver NRM</th>
<th>n/a</th>
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- Constant balance between (private) development and NRM
- Councils are aware of the need to work with neighbouring councils and that some projects rely on cooperation and collaboration for success
- Collaborations give greater leverage by putting councillors under peer pressure to participate.

### 4.3.1 Recommendations

Based on these findings we recommend:

- Ensuring that the goals and objectives of the Living Links program continue and are articulated clearly on a regular basis to participants – this is particularly important in the implementation phase as different people may need to represent their organisations in order to enact the plan
- It is important for PPWCMA to continue to support the program by providing a project team. It is also important to ensure that members of this team are able to hand over smoothly to others should they leave the project or the organisation
- Setting in place a mechanism to ensure that the key decision makers regarding funding Living Links are aware of the program and its benefits
- Communicate any completed projects to interested parties on a regular basis
- Develop a communications plan that councils may be able to use that illustrates the benefits of enacting the Living Links plan over developing private lands held in the planning area
- Ensure that councils are equipped with material that will persuade their constituents (particularly those who will do on the ground works) of the benefits of participation in the implementation of the plan
- Put in place contingency plans to cover the possibility that some collaborators may withdraw from the collaboration.
Appendices
Discussion Guidelines
Introduction

Wallis Consulting Group has been commissioned to assist in the review of the collaborative process that exists in the Living Links program in order to provide an impartial assessment and allow respondents to speak in total confidence. Information will be reported in a de-identified manner.

We envisage that the interview will take up to an hour, but more likely 45 minutes.

Background to respondents

Please tell me a bit about yourself (ves), the organisation and its involvement in the Living Links program

The importance of collaborations

- Are you involved in other collaborations? Which? (name, coverage and collaborators)

- What are drivers to collaborate? – peer influence, don’t want to be seen not to participate, reputation, desire to be seen as (council) leader?

- What are the main benefits of a collaborative program like Living Links which involves your agency and multiple councils? eg
  - Collaboration offers tangible benefits eg. $$ for projects.
  - It enhances economies of scale, leverages resources, shares staff time, expertise and resources, shares costs
  - It creates an environment that invites new ideas and approaches. It encourages better practice. Allows learning from experience, illuminates mistakes and better ways of operating
  - Builds capacity and commitment.

- What are the deterrents against collaboration? – loss of intellectual property, conflicts of interest, cost and time commitments for return etc

- What makes for a successful collaboration in your opinion?

- What factors can undermine a collaboration?
Councils’ involvement in collaborations

- What do you think are the main drivers for a Council to be involved in a collaborative program Living Links? eg
  - A wilful (internal) individual or champion
  - Committed multi-disciplinary executive leadership – allocate resources to it.
  - Recognise regional outcomes are connected to local activities.
  - Mainstream NRM is in the council culture

- How important are collaborative projects or programs to help engage councils in your agency’s plans and activities?

- How readily do you find councils are able to get involved in planning and projects at a scale of activities outside of their municipal boundaries?

- What are consequences of a council not embracing regional context for its environmental plans and activities?

- What do you think are the main barriers to Councils getting involved in collaborative program like Living Links? eg
  - Lack of staff skills, data.
  - Understanding, knowledge.
  - Lack of senior management support
  - Competing priorities
  - Institutional structures
  - Lack of political will.

Living Links

Do you think Living Links is successful? Why(not)?

How could it be improved?

JVS 29/9/10
Introduction
Wallis Consulting Group has been commissioned to assist in the review of the collaborative process that exists in the Living Links program in order to provide an impartial assessment and allow respondents to speak in total confidence. Information will be reported in a de-identified manner.

We envisage that the interview will take around 45 minutes.

Background to respondents
Please tell me a bit about yourself (ves), your role in council and your involvement in the Living Links program.

Natural Resource Management
- How does your council manage its natural resources?
- How does it deal with NRM issues that go across council borders?
- What about regional NRM matters? How does council see its role there? How does it know what is happening? How committed is council to co-operating and collaborating where necessary?
- Does LL help in:
  - Understanding NRM better
  - Bringing the relevant organisations together on regional and cross border NRM issues
  - Others?
- Are there any circumstances you can think of when council would definitely collaborate with others on NRM matters?
- Are there any circumstances when council would not support collaboration

The importance of collaborations
- Is your council involved in other collaborations? Which? (name, coverage and collaborators)
- What are drivers to collaborate? – peer influence, don’t want to be seen not to participate, reputation, desire to be seen as (council) leader?
What are the main benefits of a collaborative program like Living Links which involves your agency and multiple councils? eg

- Collaboration offers tangible benefits eg. $$ for projects.
- Ability to leverage council investment
- It enhances economies of scale, leverages resources, shares staff time, expertise and resources, shares costs
- It creates an environment that invites new ideas and approaches. It encourages better practice. Allows learning from experience, illuminates mistakes and better ways of operating
- Builds capacity and commitment.

What are the deterrents against collaboration? – loss of intellectual property, conflicts of interest, cost and time commitments for return etc

What makes for a successful collaboration in your opinion?

What factors can undermine a collaboration?

Councils’ involvement in Living Links

What are the main reasons your council is involved in Living Links?

I’m going to read some statements about Living Links and I’d like you to say whether or not you agree with each and how much. Please use a 10 point scale to rate each where 1 means you disagree totally and 10 means you agree totally (Note to interviewer: READ OUT, start in different place each time and tally those mentioned)

- Living Links provides a regional context as rationale or justification for local works
- Living Links enables council to contribute actively to regional scale initiatives that affect your municipal area
- Living Links has provided funding for projects that you would not have received if you didn’t support it
- Living Links creates opportunities to leverage resources for local environmental projects in your council area
- All relevant councils are members of Living Links
- Your councillors or senior management encourage you to support Living Links
- Your council sometimes has difficulty engaging with regional organisations like Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria and the CMA on issues and plans that affect your Council area, and Living Links provides a regular forum and communication with them
Living Links is an effective peer learning network for new ideas and approaches, encouraging better practice in regional-scale environmental planning.

The Living Links Master Plan will be an important planning tool for councils and agencies in your region.

Living Links helps your council build its capacity and commitment to environmental activities.

Living Links keeps you in contact with other Councils and agencies to explore ways to share resources and costs.

Living Links is a forum that enables your council to demonstrate leadership among its peers and participating actively in collaborations helps achieve this.

- All the councils in the region are involved in the LL collaboration, what would be the consequences of a council not participating or embracing the regional context for its environmental plans and activities?

- We're moving from the stage of planning to implementation. What do you see as the main things that will keep the collaboration moving forwards?

- What barriers can you see to the LL Master Plan being implemented?

- What would happen if one or more councils or organisations that currently collaborate in LL, decided not to, or not to act on the same timeline as others in the collaboration?

Living Links

Do you think Living Links is successful? Why(not)?

How could it be improved in general?

How could it be improved to be more useful for your council?

JVS 18/1/11
5. Discussion and recommendations

The final report from the research conducted for this project by Wallis Consulting Group provides some clear and consistent messages that largely support the research hypothesis:

*Living Links is a successful collaboration of Councils for NRM, and by reviewing and analysing its processes and characteristics, we can identify success factors that could be replicated in other areas by other groupings of Councils and agencies for more effective and efficient NRM outcomes.*

5.1 Is Living Links a success?

The Key Agencies (Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, South East Water, Port Phillip and Westernport CMA); and Collaborative organisations (SECCCA, Association of Bayside Municipalities, Urbis and Sykes Consulting), who participated in the study felt it too early to declare Living Links an ‘unqualified’ success at this stage of its life-cycle. The implementation phase will, for them, be the real test but they said Living Links is clearly well-positioned and has all the pre-requisites for success if the status quo can be maintained, and they expressed much optimism that this success would ultimately be achieved.

However, the Councils surveyed were more prepared to assess Living Links as successful in its current phase – because the Master Plan Discussion Paper could not have been developed without it, and perhaps also because they place higher value on the benefits gained from interactive planning with other agencies (particularly the ones who don’t do it as a matter of course) - rather than focusing only on the outcomes of the collaboration with a longer term view.

Councils felt that the progress on the Master Plan and a number of other Living Links achievements would not have occurred in the absence of the collaboration. They highlighted many achievements of Living Links which they considered indicators of success such as the recruitment of additional investment into projects from corporate partners; and the delivery of on-ground projects involving co-investment by three or more councils and NRM agencies. Living Links has brought people from different councils together to think about how they are connected and how to manage those connections better. Their continued and ongoing participation and financial contributions to Living Links support the positive views they expressed in the survey interviews.

It was therefore a valid assumption to analyse Living Links as a case study to develop tools and guidelines for improved NRM collaborations elsewhere.

5.2 What are the success factors for collaborations (in general), and for Living Links?

Interviewees from both groups – ‘Key agencies / Collaborative organisations’ and ‘Councils’ - agreed on many of the identifiable factors that contribute to successful collaborations, and they believed many of these are present and have contributed in some part to Living Links’ success. Several of these success factors are the subjects of the various tools or recommendations for improved NRM collaborations in the final part of this project report.

Key agencies and collaborative organisations identified the following success factors:

- Strong project management
- Clear objectives and focus
- (Engenders) trust and a sense of camaraderie and equality
- Demonstrates successes (runs on the board) and celebrates them.

Councils identified:

- Strong project management
- Clear objectives and focus
- Trust and equality
- Gets projects done that would not otherwise be possible; collaboration provides leverage
- (Demonstration that) the benefits of the collaboration outweigh the costs.
5.3 Reasons that some collaborations fail

Conversely, interviewees from both groups agreed on many of the identifiable factors that contribute to failure in collaborations. Mitigation of these factors is also the rationale for some of the tools or recommendations for improved NRM collaborations in the final part of this project report.

Key agencies / collaborative organisations, and councils identified:

- Lack of commitment from collaborators
- Collaborators are of unequal status and/or feel unable to affect action
- Political and other individual agendas intervene
- No joint ownership or someone hijacks the collaboration
- Collaborators are working at different speeds
- Objectives and focus of the collaboration change.

5.4 Recommendations

The recommendations from this research provide a guide for people or agencies who are planning a collaborative approach to a NRM project or projects; and for those who may wish to review a current collaboration which they feel is not meeting their needs and expectations.

The recommendations are drawn from the specific experiences of the Living Links program, and are based on the views of those surveyed during the study. Where appropriate, some ‘tools’ or examples from Living Links or other successful collaborations are provided to demonstrate and assist those who may seek to be guided by this study.

Recommendation 1 - Align organizational objectives

A successful alliance is established on mutual aims.

The agencies surveyed generally concurred with the sentiment that ‘the key reason for participating in any collaboration is to achieve more in aggregate than could be achieved individually… (and)... For a collaboration to be considered, the objectives need to be in keeping with the corporation’s own objectives.’

This point is highlighted in the following comment from a survey participant:

‘We choose to be involved in Living Links on the basis of our corporate plan and strategic priorities. Looking for projects that fit with these – Living Links ticks the box automatically. The catchment, water management and the environment are part of our business…. It (Living Links) allows us to be in discussions with other organizations, to influence them and to learn from them.’

Ensuring that your collaboration targets agencies that are likely to share the intended aims of the collaborative vision requires some research. This may include review of organizations’ corporate planning documents and statements, annual reports, and in the case of councils also their (physical) planning policies and strategies such as Municipal Strategic Statements, and municipal-scale strategic plans such as Open Space Strategies which most councils prepare and adopt to guide their planning decisions. Much of this research can conveniently be undertaken on the agencies’ and councils’ internet web-sites and is a vital step in scoping and planning the collaboration.
This search of your potential collaborators’ priorities may validate your early assumptions about what might be the shared aspirations and aims of the target group of organizations for your collaboration. But be prepared for the search to also challenge your assumptions in which case you may need to reconsider whom you target as potential collaborators. Or you may need to reassess the range and scope of the objectives that your proposed alliance might address.

In the case of Living Links, the regional agencies engaged such as Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria and South East Water each have elements of NRM (land, water and biodiversity) as their primary business and were therefore likely to embrace the Living Links vision. However, the ten Councils involved have a much broader service delivery charter which includes a range of social and physical (infrastructure) services in addition to their environmental enhancement / protection services pertinent to Living Links.

Each council plans and delivers its services according to an ideological balance referred to as its ‘triple-bottom line’. A council will typically weigh up myriad competing demands and seek to strike an appropriate and acceptable compromise between its community’s economic development needs, its demand for human (or social) services and its responsibilities for managing the impacts of its activities on the natural environment. Custodianship of the natural resources within its boundaries might be presumed as a high priority of a Council, but the demands of population growth and construction of service infrastructure may skew that council’s priorities and resources away from a project like Living Links, particularly in areas of high population growth. This may render such a council unable to deliver its contribution to the larger NRM vision.

Sound research and negotiation to ensure all potential collaborators share the specific and agreed project objectives is recommended as essential to establishing and sustaining a collaborative NRM project

**Recommendation 2 - Allocate sufficient resources for project development**

A foremost consideration in planning a collaborative initiative is that it should have a budget and resources allocated which are sufficient for project establishment and development in its formative phase.

Living Links was initiated by the Port Phillip and Westernport CMA with a project budget allocated from the CMA’s regional allocation from the Australian Government’s Natural Heritage Trust program. This contributed significantly to funding of a project coordinator position (1 FTE based at PPWCMA) for the first 24 months of the program inception and development.

For a program of the scope of Living Links – seeking to recruit and engage some 20 organizations - one full-time equivalent employed for at least 12 months would be considered a minimum necessary during this development stage. Adequate project development resources should also be provided to cover the publication of base marketing collateral for the project, e.g. project concept booklet/prospectus, mapping and other graphics to illustrate the vision in formats such as Powerpoint presentations or other display media. It may be necessary to commission some photography of the project area to support promotion of the project concept if current photographs are not readily available.

The brief for this project development position, (or suitable personnel seconded to this task) is to explore the collaborative vision of the project with potential collaborators – in group meetings or individual meetings – and to negotiate the details of the project scope and shape – e.g. what each is prepared to put into it and what they expect to get out of it.

Some target organizations may prefer that these initial discussions about their possible involvement be held with senior personnel from their Council or organization. Protocol would advise that initial approaches to organizations be made directly or indirectly to the Chief Executive Officer or equivalent. He or she may elect to initiate the conversations at a high level, or immediately delegate them to lower level operational management. If the high-level engagement model is preferred, it is advisable to have a senior level representative available from the project proponent, so these initial negotiations can be had at a peer-to-peer level with councilors and CEOs.
In Living Links case, the initial project proposal had the committed support of the (then) Chair of the PPWCMA Board, Dr Mick Lumb, and PPWCMA board member Ms Viv McCutcheon. They attended many meetings to promote the Living Links concept to potential partners and engage senior levels in its early stages.

The respondents to the research survey indicated that the backing of the CMA gave the Living Links proposal credibility with all levels of government, and some degree of familiarity and credibility was considered advantageous to engender support from multiple and varied organizations such as those in Living Links. The project development role must establish the buy-in levels or conditions of entry of each partner to build an appropriate fund for project coordination in the ensuing years.

The position description or task brief for this role should be devised by a representative group from the collective, with clear lines of reporting to one individual or a small group as supervisors of the role. Its initial focus should be on refinement of the project vision, production of supporting materials to promote the vision and recruitment of support. The drafting and negotiation of formal partnership agreements and financial arrangements will be a major and sometimes time-consuming task particularly if dealing with multiple government agencies whose governance and financial management regimes may be quite prescriptive.

Following a two-year period of seed funding to promote its vision, Living Links was subsequently able to establish a level of collective annual partner contributions to support the employment of 1 FTE Living Links Project Coordinator and project development resources for Year 3 and beyond. The level of funding support from partners has remained at adequate levels in ensuing years to sustain project staffing and undertake project activities, such as seed funding for on-ground works projects and for the Master Plan Development.

The resourcing levels that the collaborative project can attract in Year 2-3 and beyond, depends on the negotiation skills and communication skills of the people involved, the credibility and technical knowledge of the project proponents and the strengths or attractiveness of the collaborative project proposal to the target partners. The survey respondents considered the Living Links project management to be ‘excellent’ and said such projects need ‘a driving individual to ensure things happen’.

Furthermore they related their experiences with other collaborations that have failed in the past because ‘....no individual or body takes responsibility for keeping it alive’ and ‘... communications are poor’.

As is usually the case in project management, the quality of the outcome is relative to the quality of staff employed. The base seed-funding to recruit appropriate skills and resources in (at least) the first year to get things started, is recommended as essential to establishing a new collaborative NRM project.

A model position description for collaborative project development is provided in Appendix 1 to this report.

**Recommendation 3 - Maintain a clear and consistent focus**

Collaborations should maintain a consistent focus over time. Living Links partners who participated in the survey expressed frustration with other collaborative programs as reflected in the following statement – ‘Too many times government authorities initiate a program, (prescribing) what we have to do, and two years later they are changing policies, changing direction, changing funding and priorities.’

One respondent said other collaborative projects have fallen over ‘...because people had other work going on. Living Links is much larger than that. There is more drive to keep it going.’

Living Links has remained true to its original aims and objectives, but there have been periods in its six-year history (to date) when its clear and consistent focus have been challenged and might have been compromised without careful management. As recounted in the commentary under Recommendation 1 (above), Living Links was established and supported in its initial stages by a funding allocation from the Australian Government’s Natural Heritage Trust. However, in recent years more restrictive conditions placed on Australian Government project funding under the ‘Caring for our Country’ Business Plan meant this base annual allocation (which comprised about 50% of the project resources) is no longer available to help support the project.

Sudden changes in funding formulas have seen the demise of many similar government-funded projects. But in the case of Living Links, an imminent funding shortfall in 2007 which would have jeopardized its future was supplemented by the readiness of its project partners to increase their own annual contribution to Living Links Coordination – some by as much as an extra $5000 per year.
They could alternatively have sought to modify the scope of the project to fit the remaining available resources, or they could have taken the Australian Government’s withdrawal of funding support as a trigger to withdraw theirs – and disband the project altogether. Instead Living Links endured this ebb in its revenue stream, and the commitment of its members to their shared vision saw its development continue unabated.

NRM collaborations, particularly those involving agencies from various sectors and levels of government, will inevitably be affected by changing priorities, particularly as economic conditions vary and governments change at the Federal, State and local level. But in some cases there’s an intangible element of loyalty that each participating body seems to feel it owes to the collective - to grit their teeth and maintain their resolve to support the collaboration, because of its value to them. Living Links has survived such changes over time, by adhering to the following mantra:

• Don’t be distracted by new political trends or external influences inconsistent with the collective’s goals
• Don’t let strong partners with loud voices hijack the agenda
• Don’t take on too much, nor narrow the scope too little in response to positive or negative variations in funding
• Hold regular meetings with your partners and keep contact via emails or other communications to continually reinforce the commitment of the collective to the collaborative aims.

**Maintaining a clear and consistent focus is recommended as essential to sustaining a collaborative NRM project.**

**Recommendation 4 - Recognise and cultivate what your partners value in the alliance**

Each partner to your alliance will have their own reasons that they value the collaboration. For the alliance to develop and prosper it must be aware of these values, and work to sustain the elements that embody them. Living Links partners who participated in the survey cited various reasons that they support and participate in Living Links. These reasons include:

• ‘Organizations’ objectives are more likely to be met by the collaboration than by individual organizations or Councils acting alone’.

• ‘It’s a coordinated program with tangible benefits and the backing of the CMA…. It enables networking with other organizations … a good forum to float ideas’.

• ‘It provides a useful interface (for Councils) with Melbourne Water and Parks Victoria because they are on an equal footing’.

• ‘They (Living Links) are good at celebrating and recognizing achievement. They’re very excited about what they’ve done’.

• ‘(Living Links) helps leverage funding that allows us to carry out some larger projects than we may have had the opportunity to do otherwise.’

• ‘Being able to set up a regional vision…. Getting a larger strategic approach … Being part of a larger plan can give local projects added status’

• ‘Time commitment is one of the costs of being part of this program but the benefits outweigh the costs’.

This builds on Recommendation 3 (above) i.e. Maintaining a clear and consistent focus. Your checklist for maintaining that focus over time (as personnel and external influences around the program change), must be based on your current partners’ values. So, having verified via this survey what the current partners in Living Links value most about the program, an annual (or more regular) review framework or ‘values checklist’ might comprise the following series of questions:

• Has Living Links continued to deliver tangible outcomes that are of value to its members and that they could not have achieved working alone?

• Has Living Links consistently provided meetings, forums or other opportunities at convenient times and locations to facilitate networking between organizations?

• Has participation in Living Links enhanced relationships and improved outcomes between Councils and NRM agencies (Melbourne Water, South East Water and Parks Victoria)? Any recent or current examples?

• Has Living Links actively recognized and celebrated appropriate program-related achievements of the collective or of its member organizations (through media promotions, congratulatory messages, awards etc.)?
Has Living Links provided opportunities for partner organizations to leverage funding for projects and promoted the instances when it has done so to the rest of the membership?

Has Living Links provided tools and processes that enable partner organizations to align their local NRM plans with a regional Living Links plan?

Is Living Links confident that its partners perceive that the benefits of participation outweigh the costs?

Recognizing and cultivating what your partners value is recommended as essential to sustaining a collaborative NRM project.

A sample ‘Living Links Value Factors Checklist’ is provided in Appendix 2 to this report.

**Recommendation 5 – Recognise and resource your champions**

Your collaboration will often rely on one or a few individuals within each partner organization who will be ‘champions’ for the collaboration, and reliable conduits through which to promote the collaboration, its aims and achievements.

The Living Links Steering Committee, which comprises one or more representatives from each partner organization is chock-full of champions who are ready ambassadors for the program.

People like this are your ‘enablers’; the life-blood of your alliance. Give them the ammunition they need to be your active champions. Celebrate your successes with them to maintain and foster their positivity. Send project updates to their councillors and senior managers highlighting the value that these individuals bring to the collaboration, and how well this reflects on their council or organization. This can help to maintain higher-level support for their participation within their employing organizations.

In the course of developing its concept Master Plan to date, Living Links has distributed several project documents inviting suggestions and comments on a range of mapped corridor proposals – each one increasing the level of detail about the Living Links vision.

These documents have been excellent tools for engagement with broader audiences within Living Links partner organizations. Many steering committee members have commented on their increased ability to engage new internal audiences (e.g. planners, managers, councillors) in conversations about Living Links following the publication of the **Living Links Master Plan Discussion Paper – Corridors of Connectivity (2010)**. It gave them a clear and tangible tool that details some of the project proposals. Although it is only a concept plan, the Discussion Paper has significantly elevated the status of Living Links so it is now being referred to in the context of Council project planning (e.g. **Casey City Council Master Plan for the Hallam Valley Corridor**), and major regional NRM plans (e.g. **Melbourne Water’s Healthy Waterways Strategy**).

At times you will need to provide extra support to your enablers, for example if there is a change of conditions within their workplace. Any one of your ‘champions’ may encounter new elements of resistance to their collaborative attitudes and priorities from within their organization. A change of manager or a change to their individual role can reduce their ability and influence as your champion within their organization.

Continuously provide your champions with information and strategies that articulate the WIIFM (What’s-in-it-for-me) of the collaboration for their organization. They will need clear and current messages on-hand to respond to the people they may encounter who may question the wisdom, legitimacy, value or benefits of the collaboration.

It is also important to ensure a managed transition when there is a changeover of personnel representing an organization on the Living Links Committee. When Living Links Steering Committee representatives resign from, or change roles within their organization, we can not assume Living Links will necessarily be ‘automatically’ incorporated as part of their own organization’s position description for their replacement unless this is instigated by the departing employee or someone else representing the Living Links program.
New employees who take on council or agency roles pertinent to Living Links such as environmental planning, open space coordination or bushland management will typically do so with their own set of priorities and paradigms. Where their predecessor may have considered Living Links a valuable and fundamental way to undertake such a role and achieve efficient outcomes, the successor may not recognize its value and its benefits in the same light. So in the early weeks of their employment in their new role, Living Links would seek an opportunity to meet with replacement employees in partner organizations and brief them about the benefits of the collaborative program.

It is also advisable to prepare an induction kit containing any background documents or information about the collaboration and details of a website if there is one. Encourage the new starter to attend the next scheduled meeting or forum of the collaboration and - when they do - make a point of introducing them to the group. Encourage some of your more proactive champions or members of your committee to make them feel welcome and act as their ‘buddies’ until they become familiar with more of the group. And after the meeting, make sure someone touches base with the new starter to answer any questions that they may have about the project and their future participation in it.

Recognizing and resourcing your champions within participating organizations is recommended as essential to sustaining a collaborative NRM project.

Recommendation 6 - Develop strategies to influence the ‘stiflers’ (those who do not support the collaboration)

Alliances of collaborative effort will invariably encounter ‘stiflers’ within their partners’ organizations or among other stakeholder groups, who will seek to undermine the collaboration, its value and its purpose. These people may be of considerable influence within their own domain on the basis of their seniority, their networks of influence, and sometimes due to their role in financial management and setting budget priorities within their organization.

The future of your collaborative project may depend on effective management of these ‘stiflers’ or opponents, and your efforts to ‘win them over’. So it is important to identify them and understand their motives.

Does the collaboration represent a threat to their power base or to their traditional values and beliefs? Does it challenge the methods and modes of operation, eg. the Council’s long-held approach to NRM, for which this person may have been the main initiator or advocate? Or are they simply (and blissfully) unaware of the logic behind, and the benefits and efficiencies inherent in the collaboration because they have resisted or avoided being informed (and have never sought to ask)?

The previous research of one of this projects academic advisers, Dr Rebekah Brown identifies the influence of such ‘stiflers’ within organizations as a main factor in what she terms ‘management inertia’. People who demonstrate this are characterized by “a lack of knowledge of integrated management approaches” and won’t readily consider these as part of their organization’s core business. They will typically ask ‘Where does collaboration belong?’ ‘Whose job is it and where does it fit in our chart?’ ‘What weight should collaboration have in our budgets and what priority should it have in our schedules?’

As Di Maio (2008) summarizes in one of the listed readings ‘Collaboration promotes a shift in thinking where the question is no longer about setting boundaries, but about transcending them’. A proposal to collaborate may blur the boundaries that are set by conventional value systems so nothing fits a single category anymore. A council’s local environmental responsibilities and its contribution to regional-scale NRM outcomes can no longer be separated and pigeon-holed as mutually exclusive. And this may be too big a leap for some.

Steps towards influencing ‘stiflers’ of your collaborative project might include:

- Talk to your supportive representative/s or champion/s within the stifler’s organization and try to establish the reasons or rationale for their unsupportive attitude or behavior.
- Seek an opportunity to brief the ‘stifler/s’ about the collaboration. This might best be done in a small group, (as a one-to-one may be threatening and considered confrontational). Or encourage your local champion to seek an opportunity to brief the stifler/s. Help them prepare a presentation that articulates the benefits and advantages of participation.
• If considered necessary, develop a semi-formal business case and financial analysis for the collaborative project which quantifies and compares the relative costs and outcomes for the individual organization working both alone and as part of the collaboration. Emphasize and quantify not only the short-term benefits but also the longer-term and broader aims and outcomes. Support your case with third-party endorsement (quotes or testimonials) from high profile or respected peers from their own sector (e.g. some local government peers whom they know and respect).

• If your offer of a personal briefing is not embraced by the identified stifler, offer to send some background information about the collaborative project and forward it promptly, accompanied by a polite request for their feedback and impressions. Be persistent and creative in finding ways to continue the engagement with this potentially important stakeholder. You are a salesman for your collaboration in this situation, and it’s an old adage that ‘sales is a game of rejection’.

A further way to address the ‘stiflers’ - collectively rather than individually - is to hold a ‘Bring a Buddy’ theme meeting of the Project Steering Committee on a regular basis. For this meeting, some of your usual committee membership and attendees will be encouraged to invite along someone new from within their organization whom they would like to learn more about the collaborative project.

Be prepared for this meeting to be distracted from its agenda as the invited ‘stiflers’ may choose to challenge and debate the rationale or the methods of the collaboration. But also be ready to engage in that debate as a test of your membership’s resolve. A group exercise in addressing the queries and doubts of your stiflers can be a useful first-hand demonstration to your ‘champions’ of how to deal with resistance that they may encounter in other forums – a little bit of in-service training in being a collaborative champion.

*Developing strategies for your partners and supporters to influence stiflers is recommended as essential to sustaining a collaborative NRM project.*

Some strategies to influence stiflers and to attract new champions for your collaboration are discussed further in Appendix 4.
6. Conclusion

The research study entitled ‘Developing a model to build Council’s capacity to work together on NRM projects’ funded by the Victorian Local Sustainability Accord and the Port Phillip and Westernport CMA, is summarised in this final report – ‘Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts?’

The study established that the most prominent factor that motivates people and organisations to participate in a collaborative activity is when they see greater benefits from collaborating than by taking individual action.

The study verified that effective and efficient natural resource management is considered to be most achievable through projects managed at a landscape, catchment or regional scale; and that this can be a challenge for councils and other organisations.

The research established that Living Links is considered to be a successful collaborative project engaging multiple councils and NRM agencies in a shared endeavour. There are some success factors that are considered important to enable NRM collaboration, and Living Links is a demonstration of several of these success factors. There are also some common reasons that collaborations fail, and Living Links is seen to have mitigated or managed these factors to reduce their impact on its development and progress.

The research report concludes with six recommendations which serve as a guide for people who are planning a collaborative approach to a NRM project, or who may wish to review a current collaboration that they feel is not meeting their needs and expectations. The recommendations are drawn from the specific experiences of the Living Links project.

These recommendations are:
1. Align organisational objectives
2. Allocate sufficient resources for project development
3. Maintain a clear and consistent focus
4. Recognise and cultivate what your partners value in the alliance
5. Recognise and resource your champions
6. Develop strategies to influence the stiflers.

The Appendices to the final report provide four tools which may assist people wishing to apply the recommendations to help build or review a collaborative NRM project.

These tools are:
1. Model position description for collaborative project development
2. Value Factors Checklist
3. Alliance Resource Kit guide
4. Strategies to influence alliance stiflers and attract new champions.
Appendices

Tools to assist organisations to achieve NRM collaborations that work

Appendix 1

Model position description for collaborative project development

( Relates to Recommendation 2 )

The experience of PPWCMA in establishing four collaborative NRM projects, including Living Links, over the past decade would suggest that collaborative projects will struggle to gain support and momentum until they have a dedicated coordinator responsible for that task. The survey participants supported this view.

The nature of multi-agency collaboration is that influential personnel can change-over quickly within participating organisations. The research verified the importance of continuously monitoring the ‘health’ of your collaboration, keeping in touch with the attitudes of the people and organisations involved in it, and their relative numbers and influence, compared with others in their organisations who may not support (and may even actively oppose) the collaboration.

The larger the collaborative alliance and project aims, the more important this monitoring becomes — verifying the need for a dedicated coordination role by an appropriately skilled individual or team.

Each of the four PPWCMA major collaborative projects — Grow West, Yarra4Life, Living Links and Spirit of the Bunyip - has developed and progressed at different rates over different periods, generally consistent with the calibre of the resources allocated to their coordination.

So it is vital to employ a person or people with the appropriate skill-set, give them a clear brief, (job description, task list and guidance) and ensure they have the knowledge and resources to help establish the collaboration on a solid foundation in its formative period.

The following position description framework is based on the Position Description for the Living Links Coordinator when it was established in 2005 to guide the project’s initial development. It helps to define the resources and skills you will need to initiate and grow a collaborative alliance that will be resilient and successful. Such a coordinating role will typically be accountable to a representative executive or committee appointed by the collective under the terms of the project agreement.

Model Position Description for Collaborative Project Development role

(Living Links)

Responsibilities and Deliverables

Project definition and development

- Work with key stakeholder agencies and councils to negotiate and refine the project vision, identify shared values.
- Define the project scope and set objectives that establish what the collaboration will seek to achieve and how an alliance will add value to participant organisations.
- Draft a business plan for the project which documents the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the project ie. what it aims to do and how it will do it. Include objectives, partnership arrangements, funding and resourcing, governance or committee arrangements, planned projects with costings, timeframes and specific outcomes and targets. Importantly attempt to provide a comparative prediction of what will be achieved by the collaboration that might not occur without it.

Partnerships and relationships

- Research relevant corporate priorities of potential partners to align and refine project objectives and priorities.
- Establish formal partnerships (partnership agreement, MOU or similar) which identifies respective roles, responsibilities and contributions.
- Develop effective working relationships with stakeholders – find at least one ‘champion’ in each organisation as basis for a steering committee.
- Develop a community engagement plan that identifies which organisations and groups to involve and how best to involve them.
- Establish a reporting regime including a representative committee to guide collaborative management and transparent decision-making.
Appendix 2

A Value Factors Checklist

(Relates to Recommendation 4)

Through this research, Living Links’ partners identified a range of factors that they value about the Living Links alliance. Having established these ‘value factors’, it follows that the strength of the alliance will grow if these factors are nurtured and developed.

It is recommended that any effort to establish a similar alliance, or to review an existing one should seek to identify a similar set of ‘value factors’.

A simple questionnaire or checklist (annual or more regular) can be an efficient and effective way to establish what your partners value about your alliance, and to monitor over time whether those factors are being sustained in the alliance processes.

Here’s an example: (see over page)
The Living Links Value Factors Checklist

Living Links was established in 2005. Its aim is to help councils and agencies plan together to protect and connect green space and other natural assets across Melbourne’s south-east. Your organisation has been a supporting member of Living Links since [year].

The list below identifies the things that people say they like about being part of Living Links. To help us ensure that Living Links continues to provide the benefits that you want from it, please complete the following questionnaire:

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

1. Living Links delivers tangible outcomes to my organisation that it could not achieve working alone.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

2. Living Links provides meetings, forums and other opportunities that facilitate helpful networking.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

3. Living Links meetings, forums and activities are generally held at convenient times and locations
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

4. Living Links has helped enhance relationships between Councils and NRM agencies (eg. Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, South-East Water).
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

5. Living Links is good at recognising and celebrating its collective achievements and that is important to me.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

6. Living Links helps me leverage funding from other sources to support submissions and applications for my local projects
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

7. Living Links provides tools and processes to help my organisation align its NRM plans with the regional Living Links plan
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

8. Contributing to available opportunities to integrate environmental planning at a landscape, catchment or regional scale is important to my organisation.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

9. Living Links appeals to my organisation because the benefits of participation outweigh the costs.
   - Strongly agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

10. My organisation values that Living Links has maintained a consistent and clear focus over time.
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neutral
    - Disagree
    - Strongly Disagree
Appendix 3

Alliance Resource Kit guide

(Relates to Recommendation 5)

It is Living Links’ experience that the strength of a collaboration may rely on one or a few individuals within each partner organisation – the ‘champions’ through whom you can promote the aims and achievements of the alliance. These people are your ‘enablers’ – the life-blood of your alliance.

You need to continuously provide them with the ammunition they need to be your active champions. An induction resource kit can be provided on a regular (annual basis) that packages the aims, achievements, current activities and future directions of the collaborative project. A project website such as www.livinglinks.com.au can service or complement this kit, but must be well-managed to maintain currency.

A Living Links Alliance Resource Kit if compiled at this point of the project’s development would include:

- A listing of current member organisations with testimonials from key supporters
- Recent publications that outline aims or demonstrate current achievements and focus (Living Links Master Plan Discussion Paper – ‘Corridors of Connectivity’)
- List of benefits of participation (extract from recent survey of members)
- A simple description of ‘How to get involved’.
- Contact details for alliance members to whom questions can be directed
- Project promotional merchandise (if available) e.g. sunhat, pen, paperweight. Any appropriate and functional visual reminder of the project will help maintain its profile and engender support … (Everyone likes a free gift!)
Appendix 4

Strategies to influence alliance stiflers and attract new champions

(Relates to Recommendation 5 and 6)

Promotion of the benefits of your alliance need not be expensive, elaborate, time-consuming or resource intensive. But if developed with strategic focus on particular audiences and delivered regularly, some well-devised communication can help to influence and change the attitudes of the stiflers of collaboration that may exist in organisations. Such efforts may also opportunistically identify and inspire some new champions for your collaboration whom you may not have otherwise identified.

Organisations evolve. Personnel changeover regularly in councils and NRM agencies. If your alliance - like Living Links - involves 20 or more organisations, the profile of your support base and the dynamics between your champions and influential stiflers may change markedly in a relative short space of time.

So communications and alliance activities must be regular and constant. They must focus on the achievements of the collective, and the benefits to the member organisations.

One such initiative of strategic communication was implemented by Living Links on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of its beginning. The theme of the communication was a general self-congratulation / celebration, picking up on some of the themes identified in this research study (ie. that collaborations between councils and agencies are important for NRM, they are not easy to establish and sustain, but Living Links has been successful and enduring and we should be proud of that!)

These simple messages were delivered in an email with a Powerpoint attachment, to all councillors of the Living Links member-councils (with an advisory cc. to the Council Chief Executive Officer). In many cases Living Links had not previously had direct contact with these councillors, aside from a few individuals with an interest in the environment. It was likely that the email would reach some that might be considered ‘stiflers’ to the idea of their council committing to an NRM alliance such as Living Links.

But the key message was a positive one – Living Links on its sixth birthday has been successful and enduring. It has been such a success because of Councils’ support. The Powerpoint attached to this email to Councillors is replicated below.

Things to note about this type of communication:

- It is targeted at the Councillors recognising them as important influencers in their organisations
- It is personalised, and was emailed direct to the recipient although many were not known personally to the sender
- It is short, clear and interesting to read
- It is congratulatory of the achievement shared mutually by the sender and the receiver
- It refers to the recipient’s organisation in positive terms e.g. ‘visionary’ and ‘(you’re helping create) a world-class urban ecosystem’
- It commends the collaborative ‘champions’ within the recipient’s organisation and suggests they be congratulated or rewarded ‘for leading a vital culture called collaboration’
- It provides contact details for direct follow-up if the recipient wants to know more
- It is purely informative and doesn’t seek any commitment or specific response. It is a thought-seed; a conversation prompter.
Sample Powerpoint Email
‘Celebrating our Collaboration’

A PowerPoint attachment sent to councillors of all Living Links councils on the occasion of the Program’s sixth birthday (an achievement worth celebrating!)

CELEBRATING COLLABORATION
Dear Councillor, please take a few minutes to celebrate our successful collaboration with your Council – ‘Living Links’

Our Vision - A picturesque web of parks, open areas, beach tracks, tree-lined roadsides, wetlands, restored rivers and creeks across Melbourne’s south-east … a world-class urban ecosystem!

2010 will mark the sixth year of this ongoing collaboration of local governments and agencies in Melbourne’s south east to achieve that vision.
So why is that worth celebrating?

Collaboration doesn’t just happen! It’s a skill we’re rarely taught. Some people and organisations seem natural at it. Others find it hard, stifle it and even actively work against it.

Living Links is an example of collaboration involving around 20 organisations, that has stood the test of time – thanks to our visionary partners – including the Shire of Yarra Ranges.

Why is collaboration important?

Collaboration helps people see different aspects of a problem; constructively explore their differences; and search for solutions that go beyond their own paradigms of what is achievable.

Active collaboration has enabled the ‘Living Links vision’ - which not only transcends Council boundaries in a spatial planning sense, but also the limitations of each individual organisations’ roles and responsibilities in environmental planning.

So on behalf of Port Phillip and Westernport CMA and all our Living Links partners – THANKS for your valued support!!!!
How can you keep up the good work in 2010?

Talk to your senior management about nurturing this valuable collaborative culture in your organisation.

Encourage them to recruit, promote and reward collaborative people.

Recognise collaborative values as an asset in policies, position descriptions for employment, individual and group work plans; and reward them in work performance assessments.

And most of all …..

Next time you are talking to your Council’s Living Links representatives over the period

– CAROLINE CARVALHO, KELLY CASTELLETTI, GAVIN PRENTICE AND EMILY NOBLE

congratulate them because they are great leaders of this vital culture at your Council, called ‘collaboration’.
References


SECCCA, South East Councils Climate Change Alliance. (Website) (2009) Councils in the south-east respond to climate change.
