

Deaf Community Centre Research Project
Conducted for Deaf Children Australia and Vicdeaf Working Group
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1. Introduction

On 18 November 2014, Deaf Children Australia (DCA) and Vicdeaf announced they wanted to work together to think about a new Deaf community centre in Victoria. They formed a Working Group, which asked our research team to collect information that would help them in this task. The Working Group gave us a set of questions to answer as well as a list of issues that the Deaf community had raised in community consultations in 2014.

We first did a literature review by finding articles and books written about deaf and other cultural centres. We then studied 10 Deaf and 10 other cultural centres from Australia and overseas. We collected information about how these centres were set up, how they were managed, and what successes and problems they had experienced. This document is a summary of the report that we gave the Working Group on 16 February 2015.

When reading this report, it is important to realise that:

The full report we gave the Working Group was a large document. It is not possible to include all information in a summary report like this.

Our research could not cover everything. Setting up and running a successful community centre is complicated and we could not look at all factors. There are also many other interesting centres out there but we only had time to look at 20.

We tried to collect as much information as we could. Some organisations were happy to share information with us. Others were not able to or did not want to. This made conclusions difficult.

We had to interpret the information we collected. It is possible different people would interpret the information differently.

2. Context

2.1. Changes in the Deaf community and the sector

The Deaf community has changed a lot in the last 10 - 20 years. For example, young people with a hearing loss are more likely to have a cochlear implant and go to mainstream schools. A lot of communicating and socialising happens on the internet now through social media like Facebook. Deaf people today are more likely to be involved in the general community because it is easier to get a good education and a good job. For these reasons some Deaf and hard of hearing people may not feel that a local, regular place for the Deaf community to meet is very important to them.

Deaf organisations have also been changing. It is getting harder for organisations to survive that are expensive to run. Governments are changing how they give funding to organisations, and are expecting them to help with running costs. Organisations also often have to compete for funding and therefore need to be as efficient and well run as possible. They also need to show strong community involvement. It is important to think carefully about these changes when thinking about how a new community centre might work.

2.2. Deaf Space and why it is important for a Deaf community centre

Deaf people have always changed the spaces in which they live, study and work so that they can see each other or feel vibrations more easily and so they know what is happening around them. However, "Deaf space" is a relatively new idea in Deaf Studies and architecture. The changes Deaf people make in small spaces can also be made to large spaces or whole buildings. These changes make the space comfortable for any Deaf person but they also make Deaf spaces different to other spaces. Both the Deaf Village Ireland and the Deaf Culture Centre in Toronto successfully included the idea of Deaf space in their designs. Therefore, we feel this should be carefully considered in any new Deaf community centre in Victoria.

2.3. Community consultations

Community consultations are an important way for organisations working with a community to collect information and find out what is important for that community. Like any other community, the Deaf community has people who are active and get involved in their community and others that don't. A community organisation has to try to ask everyone in the community what they think, not just one group of Deaf people or those that are the most actively involved. When a community organisation asks the community what they want, people will usually say everything they can think of. But this may be more than the community organisation can give them. It is important to remember that different people want different things, and it can be hard for an organisation to do everything.

3. Community Centre Models

From our literature review and analysis of 20 community centres we identified five main types of centres, or “models”. These five models have some overlaps and some centres could fall under two or more models.

3.1. “Traditional Deaf club” model

The “traditional Deaf club” model is the way Deaf community centres have traditionally been run. They are run by the Deaf community for the Deaf community, and are usually supported by a State Deaf Society. Deaf clubs usually have regular events for the Deaf community like social nights, sports events, and fundraising events. Deaf people value Deaf clubs for information and social opportunities and they often have a connection with their Deaf club throughout their lives. Deaf clubs are also often on land that the Deaf community feels connected to. These clubs have a “sense of place” that is important to the Deaf community. Modbury Deaf Community Centre, Stanmore Deaf Club and Lidcombe Memorial Bowling Club, Western Australian Deaf Club are examples of this model.

3.2. “Organisational hub” model

The “organisational hub” model is where different organisations servicing different communities share a location. This model does not include a social centre. One organisation might own the building with the other organisations paying rent. Or all the different organisations might rent as a group and have a manager who looks after the building and the site for everyone. By sharing buildings and resources, organisations can save money. They often also have access to shared resources that they might not normally be able to afford, such as meeting rooms, and staff for reception and computer management.

3.3. “One-stop shop” model

The “one-stop shop” is where a community can access a number of different services in one location, but does not include a community centre. In this model, all organisations service the same community. The Multiple Sclerosis Nerve Centre is an example. It hosts a number of organisations offering services to people with multiple sclerosis. This includes information, support, counselling, referrals, massage, non-medical treatment, and other services.

In Victoria, DCA and Vicdeaf are the two main service providers for deaf and hard of hearing clients. A Deaf person and their family may use the services of both organisations at different stages of their life. If the two organisations were in the same place that could be good for DCA, Vicdeaf and the community.

3.4. “Hybrid” model

The “hybrid” model is a mix of some of the previous models. It combines services, a community centre and often also business activities all in the one location. Deaf Village Ireland, Abbotsford Convent and CERES Environment Park work this way. People can access lots of different services and social opportunities in the one place. People may therefore visit more often and use more services when they visit, including a community centre.

The people we spoke to in hybrid organisations told us that a mix of activities was very important for creating a vibrant atmosphere and attracting lots of visitors. Deaf Village Ireland, the Abbotsford Convent and CERES Environment Park also have attractive gardens and cafes. These organisations used this to try and attract visits from the general public, which was important for earning income and educating people.

The organisations we looked at used their space to share their culture and raise awareness by putting on exhibitions and cultural events. Others have displays and information around the site. For example, CERES teaches visitors about the environment and sustainability. In the same way, a Deaf community centre on an attractive location could promote Deaf history, culture and awareness to the general community.

People in hybrid organisations told us that a mix of activities made them more stable and financially stronger. They usually had some activities that made money and this could support other activities that didn’t make as much money - like community and social activities. Community centres often also cost a lot of money to run. But when they are one part of a large and stable organisation, they can still be maintained as an important part that organisation’s activities.

3.5. “Cultural precinct” model

The “cultural precinct” model is where a site is developed for a particular cultural purpose, often in an inner-city area that will get a lot of visitors. It may or may not include service providers. A cultural precinct brings together elements of a community centre with cultural and business activities. This might include theatres and conference venues. Arts Access Victoria, the Deaf Cultural Centre Birmingham, and the Deaf Culture Centre Toronto use this model.

The “cultural precinct” model may be a good option for a Deaf community centre in Victoria, especially in partnership with other arts and culture organisations. This idea is new in Deaf organisational spaces. Museums, archives, and other historical centres have existed for some time, but the newer cultural precincts (e.g. the Deaf centres in Toronto and Birmingham) include visual arts, performance, audio-visual studios, and other cultural activities. The Australian Deaf community has not had a big focus on the arts, but there is a lot of potential in this area. Many members of the Deaf community feel that the traditional Deaf club model needs to be updated. They believe Deaf clubs need to adapt with the changes happening in the Deaf community and the general community.

4. Case Studies

We looked at 10 Deaf community centres and 10 other cultural centres in Australia and overseas. Case studies for each were included in the full report provided to Vicdeaf and DCA. The table at Annex 1 shows a complete list of all of these centres. Centres were picked that were most likely to provide useful information. The DCA and Vicdeaf Working Group also suggested some specific centres to include in our study. American deaf centres were not included because they tend to be social and/or sporting clubs only and there weren’t many useful examples. Information about the Deaf Village Ireland and Deaf Culture Centre, Toronto is shown below because they are useful

examples of the “hybrid” and “cultural precinct” models. We think these models are the most promising for a new Deaf community centre in Victoria.

4.1. Deaf Village Ireland

The Catholic Institute for Deaf People (CIDP) established Deaf Village Ireland in August 2012. It is a large site that houses 12 different Irish Deaf organisations, as well different facilities: a large multi-purpose lounge area; Cabragh Hall; a chapel; a public fitness centre, including a swimming pool and a gym; a cafe managed and staffed by deaf people; a Deaf Heritage Centre; meeting rooms; classrooms; office space for member organisations. The site has a strong connection with Deaf history as it is built on part of a school for Deaf Boys and is close to a school for Deaf Girls. The Village’s Deaf Heritage Centre is in one of the original old school buildings.

The 12 resident organisations provide a range of services, social functions, church services and special events. Some of the smaller organisations receive support and advice from the more experienced ones. Deaf Village Ireland is managed by a board of directors, which includes representatives from all the organisations in the Village. This ensures that the company is a Deaf-led company, with Irish Sign Language as its first language. The Village receives income from the fitness centre, which is managed as a business. This helps ensure the autonomy of the Deaf community in managing the Village. CIDP owns the site, but the Deaf community manage the Village.

From the Deaf community’s point of view, the Village has been very successful during its first 2.5 years. It is too early to assess the Village’s governance and financial sustainability. The fitness centre already has 2,200 members, but needs more to provide enough income. Each organisation within the Village also pays rent for their office space. Once the Village has been properly established it is very possible it could generate substantial revenue, but so far it appears to have been mostly supported by CIDP.

There has been significant international interest in Deaf Village Ireland. It addresses many community concerns and aspirations, such as: the creation of a central Deaf community space; sharing control between institutional and community groups; a “one-stop-shop” for services and social activities; being located on a culturally and historically significant site; incorporating innovative Deaf space design principles; including Deaf-run businesses such as a café; and actively seeking to engage with the wider community and influence their attitudes to deaf people. It is not immediately clear how well the model would work in other environments. It will be interesting to see whether this model is sustainable and continues to generate positive responses.

4.2. Deaf Culture Centre, Toronto

The Deaf Culture Centre, Toronto (DCCT) was established in May 2006. It focusses on Deaf arts and culture. It does not host any Deaf community service agencies and does not have social spaces or community gatherings. The DCCT space includes: function space; museum; art gallery; gift shop; research archives; state-of-the-art technology; Deaf historical artefacts and literature; multimedia production studio; and office space. The centre coordinates projects and activities including: social and awards events such as the *Defty Awards*; social enterprise (Deaf artists selling their artwork); programs and workshops on culture, history, visual and performing arts; ASL and LSQ classes; cooking classes; permanent and traveling exhibits; school tours; and virtual displays.

The DCCT was planned through a series of presentations to Deaf community groups across Canada. The DCCT is located in Toronto’s historic Distillery District, which was chosen because it is an inner-city heritage, arts and entertainment precinct which draws many visitors and artists. The site has no connection with Deaf history, although some streets in the area are lit by actual gaslights at

night. DCCT were advised not to set up their centre in a suburban area as it would then become a community meeting place, which was not their aim. The DCCT is housed in a heritage building with a creative fit-out which incorporates signing motifs and Deaf space design elements.

The DCCT raises money through public donations; corporate donors; renting out the centre's space; events; sponsorships; grants for specific projects; fundraising events; group tours; and other similar strategies. Raising revenue is the main challenge facing the centre, as they do not receive core Government funding. The Director also identified the changing nature of Deaf education as a challenge. Over 90% of deaf children are mainstreamed and do not access signed language. She suggested this may mean less new artists expressing a Deaf sensibility. Some of their projects such as the *Defty Awards* are therefore aimed at nurturing these emerging artists.

5. Some factors contributing to success or failure

Many things determine whether a centre is successful or not. All centres are different and operate in different environments. However, some common themes that came out of our research are set out below.

5.1. An ongoing “sense of place”

Some centres have existed for a long time and the people using the centre feel there is something important about that location - that it has a sense of place. Sometimes a centre has to move and it can be hard to keep the “spirit” of the old centre in the new location. But new centres can also be successful. Arts Access Victoria and CERES Environment Park have created a strong sense of place in their new locations. The Deaf Culture Centre, Toronto also created a strong sense of place for the Deaf community in a completely new location. DCA and Vicdeaf will have to think carefully about the location of a new centre and whether they can create a sense of place that people will connect with.

5.2. Supporting social enterprise

Community organisations often benefit when they move away from a traditional charity model and create opportunities for social enterprise. This encourages communities to be more involved in the centre, and makes the centre stronger financially. Examples of successful social or private businesses from our case studies included venue hire and catering, cafes, conference centres, fitness centres, cleaning and catering services, and shops selling books or art. These businesses can also provide valuable employment and training opportunities for people in the community. For example, the Birmingham Deaf Cultural Centre has a Signing Tree Café and Signing Tree Conference Centre. The wider community also learns more about the deaf community and sign language when they use these businesses.

5.3. Management skills and experience

A new Deaf community centre is more likely to be successful if it is properly managed and supported. Some of the more traditional Deaf clubs we looked at found it hard to get funding and didn't have the necessary skills and experience to run the club properly. If the community centre is part of or supported by a larger organisation it can access funding and important management skills. The centre could be run autonomously but be accountable to the supporting organisation. Supporting organisations could help the centre make a business plan and a budget. This way the centre would have a regular income but donor organisations could also see that money is being spent properly.

It is also important that people from the community have a strong say in how a community centre is run. Community representation on boards and committees is important, but so is getting people with

the right skills and experience. People in management jobs also need to have a connection to the Deaf community and understand Deaf culture. If the community and management don't understand each other the community centre is more likely to fail.

5.4. Volunteers

Many of the successful organisations we looked at had a strong volunteer program, such as the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Deaf Culture Centre Toronto and CERES Environment Park. Volunteers show there is strong community spirit and involvement. Volunteers contribute to the organisation and get valuable experience in return. However, managing volunteers is not easy and organisations need to make sure there is clear understanding of roles and responsibilities.

5.5. Funding from a number of different places

Our research suggests that organisations that get funds from a number of different places are stronger than those that get their money from just one place. The Centre for Deaf People in Bristol relied on council funding. When that funding ended the centre was forced to close. Many of the successful organisations we looked at told us they try to earn money in many different ways so that they are less vulnerable when something changes. This included renting out space in their buildings, or having businesses like cafés. Some centres hired out their meeting rooms and conference facilities, or charged money for car parking. This is easier for larger organisations and those that have many different activities, like “hybrid” organisations.

6. Summary

Vicdeaf, DCA and the Deaf community need to think carefully about how a new Deaf community centre in Victoria would work. We found many examples of community centres that struggled or failed. Many traditional Deaf clubs have trouble finding funding and do not appeal to some parts of the community, such as young people. Based on our literature review and research into 20 existing organisations, we feel that the “hybrid” and “cultural precinct” models are the most promising. A community centre is more likely to succeed if it is part of or supported by a larger organisation, has broad appeal within the community, attracts the general public, has income earning activities and social enterprise, has a sense of place, is supported by volunteers, and has good management.

ANNEX 1: Table of Case Studies

Organisation	Website
Deaf organisations	
Auckland Deaf Society	http://www.auckland-deaf.org.nz/
Centre for Deaf People Bristol	http://www.accessiblewebdesign.co.uk/clients/cftdb
Deaf Community Centre, Limerick	http://www.dcclimerick.eu
Deaf Cultural Centre, Birmingham	http://www.deafculturalcentre.com/
Deaf Culture Centre, Toronto	http://www.deafculturecentre.ca
Deaf Village Ireland, Dublin	http://www.deafvillageireland.ie/
Manchester Deaf Centre	http://www.manchesterdeafcentre.com
Modbury Deaf Community Centre, South Australia	http://www.deafcando.com.au/
Stanmore Deaf Centre and Lidcombe Memorial Bowling Club, Sydney	http://deafinns.com/stanmore-deaf-centre/
West Australian Deaf Centre, Perth	https://www.facebook.com/WADRAcommunity
Other cultural organisations	
Abbotsford Convent	http://abbotsfordconvent.com.au/
Arts Access Victoria, South Melbourne	http://artsaccess.com.au/
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Footscray	http://www.asrc.org.au/
CERES Environment Park, Brunswick	http://www.ceres.org.au/
MS Nerve Centre, Blackburn	http://www.mssociety.org.au/nerve-centre.asp
Sydney Pride Centre	http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_Pride_Centre
The School of Life Melbourne	http://www.theschooloflife.com/melbourne/
Scope Victoria, Box Hill	http://www.scopevic.org.au/
Veneto Club, Bulleen	http://www.venetoclubmelbourne.com.au/
Writers Victoria, Melbourne	http://writersvictoria.org.au/