

***From Vision to Methodology to Practice -Symposium  
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The Connecting Families Project***

***Profile of the City of Wagga Wagga:***

The Wagga Wagga Local Government Area (LGA) is located in the south-west region of NSW. It occupies an area of 4,886.43 sq.km. and encompasses the urban area of the city of Wagga Wagga and the surrounding small rural villages of Galore, Collingullie, Currawarna, Kapooka, Uranquinty, Mangoplah, Humula, Tarcutta, Ladysmith, Forest Hill, Gumly Gumly and Oura. It takes about one hour to travel north-south across the LGA, and two plus hours to travel east-west.

The city of Wagga Wagga is situated on the Murrumbidgee River and is the largest inland city in New South Wales. The original inhabitants of the area were members of the Wiradjuri nation, once the largest Aboriginal group in NSW.

***Key demographic characteristics of Wagga Wagga:***

- Wagga Wagga has a total population of 55,056
  - The population is predominantly urban, with approximately 90 percent living in the city and outlying suburbs and only 10 percent in the surrounding rural area and villages
  - Population figures for the urban area are 50,634, and for the rural villages in this project (approximate): Forest Hill/Gumly Gumly 2,142; Ladysmith 198; Tarcutta 263; Humula 219; Mangoplah 219
  - 22.6 percent of the total population of Wagga Wagga is under the age of 15
- (ABS Census 2001)
- There is a high proportion of families with young children and a higher than state average proportion of single parent families
  - The population is transient in nature due to the presence of two major defence force facilities and current employment

(ABS Census 1996)

***Background***

The Wagga Wagga City Council 1998 Social Plan identified social isolation as a major issue for families. This occurs because of the transient nature of the population, lack of extended family networks and because of a lack of public transport from rural villages.

There is a lack of emergency and respite childcare. Family violence, divorce, poor parenting, low income and unemployment, weak community networks, and substance abuse were identified as issues for the community. An associated issue was the difficulty of effective coordination between existing child and family support services in meeting family needs.

Accordingly one of the key recommendations of the Social Plan was to explore funding options for service delivery and ways in which coordination between relevant child and family services could be effected to address the above issues. While these issues are common to the whole geographic area of the LGA, other events precipitated funding for support programs on the western side of the city. Council then concentrated on the eastern side of the LGA.

Council's Community Services Division undertook to explore funding options to address these issues, monitored by an interagency group that acts as a reference and monitoring agent for Council's social planning process.

In 2000 a submission to the Department of Family and Community Services, under the Strengthening Families Initiative, was successful in gaining funding for a two year project to employ a project worker four days a week, auspiced by Wagga Wagga City Council. The Connecting Families Project commenced in Wagga Wagga in April 2002.

***Community development approach:***

The project team has adopted a community development approach for the implementation of the Connecting Families Project. This approach matches the action research model allowing for the following important elements to occur:

- The project takes a developmental approach so that there is flexibility for developing or growing responses with the communities' identified needs and solutions. This allows for changes to occur in the project direction, rather than a fixed implementation model, and therefore the action research model complements this approach.
- The developmental approach is driven from a primary intervention focus, which is paramount in our rural regional area. Due to the strained resource allocations to service delivery there is now particular focus on specialised service delivery and tertiary intervention. This current response and practice is seen as not sustainable given our population and difficulties in retaining and attracting service personnel to the rural regional area, thus the importance of focusing this project and like programs on a primary intervention model. Not dissimilar to other areas our region has experienced a retraction from outreach and early intervention support to more targeted secondary and tertiary intervention, despite all the research of the benefits of early intervention. While we all acknowledge the relevance and need for all levels of community response, there is a clear gap in primary intervention and a lack of engagement of communities for flexible model development. Therefore, Council adopts a community development approach for this particular project.
- In the true sense of community development, self-determination of communities is paramount in ensuring the sustainability of the project. Working with existing groups, individuals and services, as well as forging new connections, our engagement and working relationships are both the foundation of and the driver to the project's outcomes. The communities' input and determination of project directions are embraced and matched to initial project aims with flexibility to adjust to local context. At the same time the project team continually reviews the ethical approach taken, so that community involvement in determination and implementation of actions will ensure appropriate and accepted practice. This in turn can change the project directions at times but ensures self-determination of the project in terms of overall impact to individual communities.
- Finally, the sustainability of the project is continually reviewed at each developing stage. The project team reviews not only the local environment and the likelihood of sustainability of project directions in each community, but also that the strategies implemented overall will be a platform to other levels of government directions past the project's funded life, for example the Families First Program being implemented at a NSW state government level.

## ***Working in a Local Government context - in New South Wales - in Wagga Wagga:***

Working in the local government context requires balance and coordination of features that can challenge both the community development and action research approaches.

- The traditional role of Council has focussed on the 3 R's - 'roads, rates and rubbish'. In this Council the direct provision of 'community services' has little history. Resourcing therefore has not been traditionally provided to this area. This role has broadened, and the way in which Council is now required to view and work with its community has also broadened. The new requirements for social planning and attention to access and equity under the Local Government (General) Amendment (Community and Social Plans) Regulation 1998 have seen a large increase in activity. Council is required to adopt a planned approach of consultation with its community to determine directions for planning and delivery in recreation, cultural and community facilities and services, as well as more traditional areas. However, both staff and program funds are still limited.
- The regulatory role of local government tends to create an authoritarian approach. The organisational structure is bureaucratic and tends towards inflexibility. Neither of these promotes a facilitative or flexible style of operation. Action research, and community development, set up an interactive relationship with the client (community) and partners other agencies in which clients' and partners' reactions modify the approach of the service provider. This can be difficult for and within an organisation that anticipates that service delivery will proceed according to pre-set patterns.
- Because of the lack of experience for the organisation in working in this area and in this way, a primary intervention approach is seen as likely to be most effective in terms of staff capacity, and more likely to be accepted within the organisation as a legitimate approach to meeting community needs.
- One of the issues in working with a community development approach is the time factor; it takes time to engage with communities, establish relationships and generate community ownership. Given the scale of this project (seven communities) and the relatively short timeframe, and the stretched resources of Council, partnerships are critical. Support from the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) and the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) has been of great assistance in providing research back-up, a sounding board for project development and guidance in the development of the action research approach.
- The project worker is located in the Social development Division of Council, which comprises six other project workers. The Division operates collaboratively, although all workers have specific focuses, and there is strong team support. This has meant that while the project worker is individually responsible for the project, she has made strong links with the other workers. This has resulted in assistance from other staff, so that as well as project management, there has been personal support, project development assistance, hands-on help in running specific activities and alignment of other projects to capitalise on and value-add to the aims of this project.

## ***The Connecting Families Project***

### ***Project Description:***

This is a two year project to develop support strategies for children and families at risk, in the eastern suburbs and rural villages of the Wagga Wagga Local Government Area.

### ***Aims and Objectives:***

The aim of the project is to strengthen families by addressing the needs of at risk families and children. The project will also work with the communities to identify their needs for family support and develop community driven strategies for meeting such needs.

It was intended that this would be achieved through:

- identification of families and children at risk and appropriate placement in childcare
- collaborative development of appropriate and coordinated models of service delivery
- development of models of community based family support
- development of partnerships with government and non-government sectors.

The targeted areas for this research project were defined as the eastern suburbs of Kooringal, Gumly Gumly and Forest Hill; and the rural villages of Ladysmith, Tarcutta, Humula, and Mangoplah.

The components of the program were anticipated to have included:

- links for vulnerable families and children at risk developmentally or with behavioural concerns into existing child care services - short term respite and/or on going placement.
- A mobile service to rural villages to provide information on child development and parenting strategies and promote existing child care services
- Coordination of support for at risk families through partnerships with family support service providers.
- Parenting education and family strengthening through the development of community relationships and networks such as extended family members and or identified neighbours/volunteers.

### ***Action Research Cycle to date:***

The first phase of the Connecting Families action research cycle was to:

- engage with the project's seven communities;
- identify families for referral and linkage and
- engage with service providers for improved or alternative service delivery.

Upon doing this it was discovered that there was a discrepancy between the assumptions behind the workplan objectives and the resources and needs identified, so that a more thorough assessment needed to be undertaken before new strategies/objectives could be followed. This precipitated Cycle 2. The Project Officer identified community networks and key individuals, and consulted with all the communities and with service agencies. From this assessment a mapping document was formulated outlining the resources of the seven communities, the needs of each and a description of relevant features.

	<u>ROCKWELL</u>	<u>GUMLY</u>	<u>FOREST HILL</u>	<u>LEPTONVILLE</u>	<u>WAGGA WAGGA</u>
<b>PRESENT SERVICES IN TOWN</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2 Play Groups</li> <li>- FDC Playgroup</li> <li>- Mother Group</li> <li>- 1 Preschool</li> <li>- Full capacity</li> <li>- 2 Child Care Centres</li> <li>- Cater to middle to higher socio- economic classes</li> <li>- 1 Casual Care Centre</li> <li>- Fully booked</li> <li>- 1 Early Childhood Clinic</li> <li>- Bus Transport</li> <li>- Shopping Mall</li> <li>- Activity day recently introduced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1 Small School (16 Students – 1 Teacher)</li> <li>- Local Football Club</li> <li>- 1 Local Shop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1 Small School</li> <li>- 1 RAAF Base</li> <li>- 2 Playgroups</li> <li>- RAAF Playgroup</li> <li>- Mothers Group – in process of establishment</li> <li>- 1 Pre School</li> <li>- Noted floating population through pre school</li> <li>- 1 Caravan Park</li> <li>- 2 Shops</li> <li>- Mobile Library Van (fortnightly)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1 Small School (30 Students – 2 Teachers)</li> <li>- 1 Playgroup</li> <li>- 1 Shop</li> <li>- 1 Pub</li> <li>- CWA</li> <li>- Red Cross</li> <li>- Progress Association</li> <li>- Church Group</li> <li>- Mobile Library van (fortnightly)</li> <li>- Craft Day – held at local mothers house, used as a social outlet for mothers and networking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2 Small Schools</li> <li>- Public</li> <li>- Catholic (14 St Teachers)</li> <li>- 1 Playgroup</li> <li>- 1 Mobile preschool</li> <li>- 1 Community C (Focus on Aged Care – Visiting Doctor 1 week)</li> <li>- 2 CWA groups</li> <li>- Progress Assoc</li> <li>- Mobile Library van (fortnightly)</li> <li>- A number of bus shops</li> <li>- 1 Pub</li> <li>- 1 Club</li> </ul>
<b>GAPS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clients access to Services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No Play group (In process of setting up playgroup. Referred to Playgroup Association).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Child Care for RAAF based children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- None identified at present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Services for families and young children</li> </ul>
<b>COMMUNITY PROFILE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Split Community</li> <li>- Has low socio-economic population</li> <li>- High number of Housing Commission houses in area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Many families associated with the school from Forest Hill</li> <li>- High population of elderly residents</li> <li>- Town very supportive of football club – social event</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hard town to break into</li> <li>- Floating community</li> <li>- Working with DCO</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very strong community</li> <li>- Very active</li> <li>- Distribute a monthly newsletter for the towns people reporting on local activities etc.</li> <li>- Community in the process of working towards upgrading their tennis courts to encourage family and social activities.</li> <li>- Middle socio-economic families – majority house wives and working husbands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supportive communities</li> <li>- farming families</li> <li>- low socio-economic families</li> </ul>
<b>POSSIBLE MODELS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shopping Centre Model</li> <li>- Partnership Model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Playgroup Model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Caravan Park Model (TAFE or PAT to pick up)</li> <li>- Supported playgroup model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Research town</li> <li>- Use town as a measuring tool and source of information</li> <li>- Self help community model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community support</li> <li>- Home visiting</li> <li>- Community/ser model</li> </ul>
<b>MODEL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shopping Centre Model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Playgroup Model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supported Playgroup Model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self Help Community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community/Ser Split Model</li> </ul>
<b>REFERENCE GROUP</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wagga Reference Group to oversight this project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wagga Reference Group to oversight this community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wagga Reference Group to oversight this community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mothers group to oversight this community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CWA (older women) oversight this community</li> </ul>

What was discovered through analysis of this tool was that each of the seven communities had specific needs that required an individualised approach. This was in contrast to earlier assumptions of commonality across the rural villages in the first instance, and the town suburbs in the second. Further development, following community discussion, allowed the adoption of models for each of the communities. Further cycles (see below) using the action research model have allowed this project to remain closely aligned to its original intent and be responsive to community needs.

***Workplan Objectives:***

Each workplan objective has undergone much evolution and re-focus as it passes through the action research cycle of Planning, Acting, Observing and Reflecting. The process has also witnessed the growth of service involvement and community ownership as it passes through these cycles. These changes are outlined below.

**Objective 1:**

To provide both short and long term placement (as appropriate) in existing child care services for children at risk.

<p><b>•Cycle 1:</b> Determine unutilised placements Place children (identified at risk)</p> <p><b>•Cycle 2:</b> Re-define direction of project Look at the role of DoCS Look at context of childcare Look at alternatives</p> <p><b>•Cycle 3:</b> Identify other support models Map service system supports</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ All Child Care Centre Directors</li>   <li>❖ NSW Department of Community Services (Area Office)</li> <li>❖ Wagga Wagga Child Care Centres</li> <li>❖ Department of Family and Community Services (State Office)</li>   <li>❖ Sub-Reference Group</li> <li>❖ Interagency Group</li> <li>❖ Department of Community Services (CSC)</li> </ul>
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**Objective 2:**

To work collaboratively with government and community sector agencies to develop and implement flexible and coordinated models of service delivery, for families and children at risk, that can accommodate the diversity of issues pertaining to rural areas.

<p><b>•Cycle 1:</b> Develop working group Research models and collect resources and information</p> <p><b>•Cycle 2:</b> Develop the Sub-Reference group Liaise with partner program Identify appropriate models</p> <p><b>•Cycle 3:</b> Introduce models to communities and begin implementing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Interagency Group</li><li>❖ Project Communities</li><li>❖ Australian Institute of Family Studies Library</li> <li>❖ Sub-Reference Group</li><li>❖ Australian Institute of Family Studies Library</li><li>❖ Internet</li><li>❖ Service Providers</li> <li>❖ Sub-Reference Group</li><li>❖ Project Communities</li></ul>
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**Objective 3:**

To investigate appropriate models of community based family support and apply such models where appropriate for children and families at risk

<p><b>•Cycle 1:</b> Map existing support groups and community structures Develop trial and evaluate appropriate model</p> <p><b>•Cycle 2:</b> Identify needs of each community and develop individual community models</p> <p><b>•Cycle 3:</b> Gain agreement from both sub-reference group and communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Project Community Groups (P&amp;C, CWA, Playgroup mothers, Progress Association)</li><li>❖ Service providers</li> <li>❖ Project Community Groups</li><li>❖ Sub-Reference Group</li><li>❖ Interagency Group</li> <li>❖ Project Community Groups</li><li>❖ Sub-Reference Group</li></ul>
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#### **Objective 4:**

To develop partnerships with government and non-government service providers to provide effective and coordinated supports for families and children at risk.

<p><b>•Cycle 1:</b> Develop and maintain working agreement with reference group/ committee</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Wagga Wagga Service Providers</li><li>❖ Partner Program (Ashmont Community Resource Centre)</li></ul>
<p><b>•Cycle 2:</b> Identify possible committee members Map their involvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Connecting Families Team</li><li>❖ Service Providers</li></ul>
<p><b>•Cycle 3:</b> Development of Sub-Reference Group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Wagga Wagga Service Providers</li><li>❖ Sub-Reference Group</li></ul>
<p><b>•Cycle 4:</b> Develop and maintain working agreement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Sub-Reference Group</li><li>❖ Wagga Wagga Service Providers</li></ul>

#### ***Project Activities:***

Out of the identified models that have been selected for each community a number of activities have been run with the aims of:

- engaging and interacting with the community,
- identifying and meeting needs in a non-confronting manner,
- and encouraging community members to interact and become involved.

Two such examples are the Koorringal Activity Days and the School Holiday Program.

#### ***Koorringal Activity Days:***

**Planning:** The aim of the activity was to engage the local community to identify what they felt the needs of their community to be.

**Acting:** Set up simple activities in a paved surface open courtyard in the local shopping mall every Thursday from 10am – 12 noon. These included:

- *Childrens Activities:* such as
  - Table of Playdough
  - Bubble mixture and bubble wand
  - Balloons
  - Paper and pencils
  - Books
- *Talking to Parents*
- *Provision of information on activities:* such as playdough recipe, making of bubble mixture and how to make a kite.
- *Referral*

**Observing:** Over the 16 week period that the activity days ran there was an average attendance of 15 children and 10 families per week, with some of these families attending on a regular basis. Support was provided to mothers with the opportunity to talk to other mothers as well as professional workers and to access simple activities for their children. It was observed that parents were more likely to attend if in an open public place rather than in a room which had to be entered.

Many parents utilised the presence of the activity day to occupy children before or after doing the weekly shopping. Much support was given from the local shopkeepers in relation to supporting the activities and promoting its existence.

The utilisation of tools and resources from such organisations as The Parents As Teachers Centre and the Playgroup Association in addition to staff from the Social Development Division at Council, assisted in the provision of the activity days

Other service providers such as the Community Health Early Childhood Nursing Unit, Family Support and The NSW Department of Community Services offered support for the project and assisted wherever possible.

**Reflecting:** Although the need identified was a lack of childcare, what became evident was that parents valued the social interaction and that they were deemed important to have activities provided for them. Through action research the activity days developed from a method of engagement and gathering of information to providing a successful supported playgroup model.

Cost for facilitating the activities was minimal as furniture and equipment was borrowed and brought in on a weekly basis from the Parents As Teachers Centre.

### ***School Holiday Activities:***

**Planning:** The aim was to provide school holiday activities to children and families, in two of the rural villages where isolation and lack of service provision has been identified.

**Acting:** The program comprised developed activities to entertain the children during the school holidays in addition involving the broader community that were free. The following program was developed:

- *Sports Day* for children of all ages to be run in conjunction with NSW Department of Sport and Recreation from 9:30 am until 3:30pm. Pre-school children attending from 10am until 12 noon.
- *Community Barbecue* to be facilitated by the local School Parents & Citizens Committee, commencing at 5:00pm.
- *Family and Community Film night* at a local community venue commencing at 6:30 pm.

**Observing:** The activities were held on separate Wednesdays for each community. Both communities had an attendance rate of approximately 80 -90% of families. The majority of children within the communities attended the sports day. Children were willing to interact with other children of different ages when participating in the sporting activities. Pre school children were able to participate in games that the older children were playing.

The Barbecue and film night saw many community members attend including those without children. This gave a whole community involvement feel. Fathers also attended and some even sat and watched the children's movie.

Both communities were able to identify ways of facilitating future similar activities themselves in order to encourage more community participation and involvement.

**Reflecting:** Due to the identified issue of isolation parents valued the social interaction and chance for a break from children during school holidays. The community expressed their feelings of gratitude that they were identified as important enough to have activities provided for them, instead of being too far out of the way to have services come to them.

Costs for these activities included catering costs and the hire of the film projectionist and projection equipment. Food costs were modest, film costs were approximately \$450.00 each occasion.

***Summary:***

This two year project, funded through the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy has enabled Wagga Wagga City Council to address issues identified through its social planning process. The rural and regional nature of this community has particular issues of isolation and service delivery difficulties. The action research methodology has meshed strongly with the community development approach to shape a project that is already strengthening communities. We believe that the project has good chances for community ownership and therefore sustainability, critical given that funding for increased services in this region and for these needs is unlikely.

The activities and partnerships already formed have strengthened the relationship between the Council, the community and service providers.

## ***How The Example Activities Meet Objectives***

<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Koorringal Activity Day</b>	<b>School Holiday Activities</b>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Objective 2</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Selection of an appropriate model</li> <li>▪ Networking</li> <li>▪ Referral</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Networking with community and service providers</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Objective 3</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Engagement of community</li> <li>▪ Identification of communities needs and desires</li> <li>▪ Community interaction</li> <li>▪ Evolvement of an appropriate model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Engagement of community</li> <li>▪ Communities identification for the need of school holiday activities</li> <li>▪ Community interaction</li> <li>▪ Identification by community members to facilitate similar activities</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Objective 4</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Networking</li> <li>▪ Referrals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Networking</li> <li>▪ Formation of partnerships</li> </ul>

# Attachments

## **Sub-Reference Group Members**

- NSW Department of Community Services (NSW Area Office)
- NSW Department of Education and Training
- Greater Murray Area Health Service, NSW Department of Health
- Centacare (Family Counselling)
- Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation Community and Child Care Centre
- Wagga Wagga City Council

## **Wagga Wagga Interagency Group Partnerships**

- Defence Community Organisation
- NSW Department of Community Services (Area and CSC offices)
- Women's Health Centre
- NSW Family Support Service
- Greater Murray Area Health Service, NSW Department of Health
- Kurrajong Early Intervention Service
- NSW Department of Education and Training
- NSW Playgroup Association
- Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation Community and Child Care Centre
- Wagga Wagga Ethnic Communities Council