



AREA ASSISTANCE SCHEME INTERAGENCY PROJECT



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Report

*Prepared by Milliways Pty Ltd for Manning Valley
Neighbourhood Services Inc.*

MILLIWAYS
CONSULTANTS

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**Contact: Caron Watkins
manager@mvns.org.au**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Poverty and its impact on the community is of serious concern to the residents of the Manning Valley. Unfortunately the Manning Valley region is one of the more disadvantaged areas of NSW. In response to this situation, the Manning Valley Neighbourhood Service Incorporated initiated an action research project to identify structural issues promoting poverty in our local area and significant gaps in service delivery. The project was funded through the Area Assistance Scheme as a community infrastructure development project.

The research identified that for both people living under the poverty line and service providers the major factors affecting poverty are a lack of financial resources, the cost of suitable housing, lack of permanent and reasonably paid employment opportunities, poor health combined with inadequate access to affordable health services, deficiencies in educational opportunities for children and insufficient low cost transport throughout the large geographic region. While these factors come as no real surprise to social researchers, this research highlighted that, for this region; housing affordability, poor access to mental and physical health services and inadequate transport options are the most concerning factors.

The research also addressed gaps and perceived gaps in local service delivery with the view to initiating action to overcome these gaps. Gaps were identified in services needed to; address mental health issues, social isolation, housing affordability, legal matters, transport for particular groups within the community, domestic violence, drug and alcohol addiction, children's and youth services and school attendance and discipline.

Action was taken to; produce a counselling services guide, assess the feasibility of implementing a pool of emergency relief resources to complement the existing services, raise community awareness of local services through a community expo, and enhance service organisation skills and networking. Support was provided to other organisations in the areas of transport and legal services.

Fundamental to this project was the value of networking, information exchange and dissemination of information about services to the community. One of the major objectives of the project was to enhance existing, and initiate new opportunities for information exchange and dissemination through the local Manning Valley Interagency forum and other activities. A training and information day for service providers was held. Service providers came together to network, share information and build collegiate relationships. Guest speakers spoke on the benefits of maintaining networks and developing effective referral pathways.

The research had some limitations; however, it does provide valuable insight into the areas of greatest concern to people living under the poverty line and their service providers. The findings of the research support the consideration of future strategic programs in the areas of; housing affordability, enhanced information dissemination (particularly around financial counselling, mental health, domestic violence and drug and alcohol support), programs aimed at improving school attendance, emergency relief, healthy lifestyle and nutritious food choice and preparation, social and community engagement, transport, legal services, maintenance and enhancement of existing networking forums, and the on-going provision of sector wide workshops, seminars and training for service agency personnel.

The remainder of this document provides the underlying detail of the research project.

2. INTRODUCTION

This report forms the final stage of a project initiated by the Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services Inc. (MVNS) aimed at researching factors affecting poverty in the Manning Valley, identifying gaps in service delivery, implementing actions in light of the research and enhancing information exchange and networking among service providers.

While this report has been written primarily for the project funding body, the Department of Community Services (NSW), the findings of this report are likely to be of interest to a wider audience including; the Greater Taree City Council, the Manning Interagency and community service providers in the region.

The report summarises the information gained during the research phase of the project and in doing so takes into account recent Australian research in relation to poverty. Factors affecting poverty in our region and gaps in service delivery from the perspective of both service providers and clients are explored. This information then informed decisions on actions that were initiated in response to the research findings. These actions and subsequent outcomes are documented in this report.

Finally, the report draws together the research findings and addresses potential future actions and strategies that have emerged during the course of the project.

3. BACKGROUND

There is a diverse range of welfare service providers offering services to clients in the Greater Taree Local Government Area (i.e. the Manning Valley) and concern over poverty and its ramifications is at a high level.

While there is no apparent consensus on a definition of poverty in the literature, most agree that poverty is a relative concept and describes people living below the community standard and who cannot take part in activities that most people take for granted^{1,2}. According to the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) there was almost 11 percent of the Australian population living under the poverty line in 2005-06. The NSW poverty rate was 11.3 percent³.

The term 'poverty line' is used to describe minimum levels of income necessary to achieve a decent standard of living. For the March quarter 2009 the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research has updated the poverty line in Australia to \$736 (including housing costs) per week for a family comprising two adults, one of who, is working and two dependent children⁴.

¹ACOSS. *Facts about Poverty* www.ncoss.org.au/bookshelf/conference/...poverty/povertyfacts.pdf

²Parliament of Australia. *Poverty Rates by Electorate*. 2005 www.aph.gov.au/library

³Miranti, Riyana and others. *Poverty at the local level: National and small area poverty estimates by family type for Australia in 2006* Paper prepared for 'Creating Socio-economic Data for Small Areas: Methods and Outcomes' Workshop, Canberra, 19 September 2008. www.canberra.edu.au/centres/natsem

⁴*Poverty Lines: Australia*. March Quarter 2009. Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.

Data on rates of poverty at the Local Government Area (LGA) level is difficult to obtain as the ABS Census and Survey of Housing and Income data is collected in a way that is not suitable for the measurement of poverty⁵. However, it is known that the Greater Taree LGA:

- Has at least 5311⁶ people living under the poverty line (although in reality the figure is probably higher as this calculation is based on the NSW rate of poverty and the following data suggests that the local rate is probably higher than the state average);
- Falls in the top quintile of income poverty as modelled by NATSEM⁷ (i.e. all LGAs modelled in Australia were divided into five equally sized groups with around 190-202 LGAs in each quintile and Greater Taree falls within the group with highest poverty rates);
- Has a relatively low SEIFA (Relative Socio-economic Indicators for Areas) index of 941.9 and is in the lowest 30 percent in NSW on this index⁸. Within the LGA, the most disadvantaged area is Taree itself⁹;
- Includes postcodes (including Taree itself) in the 36 most disadvantaged postcode areas of NSW as identified by Tony Vinson in the *Dropping of the Edge* report into disadvantaged communities (2007)¹⁰;
- Has a relatively high unemployment rate (8.2 percent June quarter 2006) compared with 5.3 percent for NSW¹¹;
- Has a population with a relatively low average gross income for wage and salary earners. The average income was \$34,504 p.a. (i.e. \$629 per week) in 2006, compared with the NSW state average of \$49,728 p.a.¹²;
- Has lower than the NSW average of population with post-secondary qualifications (most at the certificate level) and internet access at home¹³; and

⁵ The census provides only gross income, with no information about income tax, and provides this income measure only in ranges, not actual dollar figures.

⁶ 11.3% of the Greater Taree population as at 2006 Census.

⁷ Tanton, Robert and others. *Rich suburbs, poor suburbs: Small area poverty estimates for Australia's eastern seaboard in 2006*. Paper for the 1st General Conference of the International Microsimulation Association 20-21 August 2007. www.canberra.edu.au/centres/natsem

⁸ <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2033.0.55.001.2006?OpenDocument>

⁹ SEIFA index of disadvantage. www.gtcc.nsw.gov.au

¹⁰ Vinson, Tony. *Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*. 2007.

¹¹ ABS. *National Regional Profile*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>

¹² ABS. *National Regional Profile*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>

¹³ ABS. *National Regional Profile*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>

- Has a relatively large Indigenous population (4.4 percent of the total LGA population compared with 2.2 percent across the state)¹⁴ and Indigenous people are substantially over represented among the poor¹⁵.

Further, there was anecdotal evidence that local services, while responding to individual needs and individual organisational objectives, were not fully aware of the range of other services available for referrals. There was a perceived need for greater information exchange and networking opportunities amongst service agencies.

In response to this situation, MVNS initiated an action research project to identify structural issues promoting poverty in our LGA and significant gaps in service delivery. The project was funded through the Area Assistance Scheme as a community infrastructure development project and is referred to as the Interagency Project.

4. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Interagency Project aimed to:

- Develop strategies to address gaps in service delivery;
- Identify poverty traps in the Manning Valley;
- Work in with other welfare agencies to promote seamless service delivery and reduce service duplication via a coordinated approach;
- Build on existing local interagency forums and networks to promote a self-supporting system resulting in idea generation, leadership and advocacy on issues; and
- Identify common problems that can be owned and addressed by the community.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Comprehensively consult with a diverse range of service providers and clients to ensure that they all have the opportunity to provide input and feedback;
- Identify gaps in service delivery and develop strategies to address them; and
- Develop strategies for supportive networks, advocacy priorities and community building.

5. METHODOLOGY

A project worker was appointed to undertake the research, facilitate the development and enhancement of support networks and then develop and put in place strategies arising from the research findings. The project was funded for a period of 24 months on a part-time basis.

The Interagency Project was overseen by a management sub-committee of the Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services. A sub-committee of the Manning Valley Interagency forum acted as an advisory committee and provided valuable input, directional advice and support.

¹⁴ ABS. *National Regional Profile*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>

¹⁵ *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A statistical report on waves 1 to 6 of the HILDA study*. 2009. <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/statreport.html>

5.1 Phase 1: Information gathering

A thorough questionnaire was developed and distributed to all service agencies in the area. The questionnaire explored issues relating to; information dissemination, referral processes, service gaps (both external and internal to the individual service agency), networking opportunities and poverty traps in the Manning. 64 questionnaires were completed, this represented 49 percent of the 130 agencies identified and approached. Questionnaire respondents were asked to identify and rank poverty traps in the Manning Valley; however, it must be noted that most service agency respondents while identifying factors impacting on poverty did not provide any form of ranking.

Further, the project worker played an active role in facilitating and co-ordinating the Manning Valley Interagency Forum in order to consult with key service agency stakeholders and stimulate discussion and activities. In addition to the regular meetings an Interagency workshop on poverty was sponsored by the project.

Service clients were also consulted and were asked about the major issues and hurdles facing them and the types of services that they need. A cohort of approximately 115 people who self-identified as living under the poverty line was asked two simple questions, namely –“ i) What are the major issues (max 2) you/your family have had to deal with in the last 3 months? ii) What kind of service delivery / program do you think could help you with this (existing or non-existing)?”

In addition, the Australian literature was reviewed to help identify the major characteristics and circumstances of people experiencing poverty, the issues they face and the barriers that prevent people from overcoming the traps of poverty.

Section 6 details the major findings of the information gathering and consultation phase of the project.

5.2 Phase 2: Actions and Strategies

The findings of the consultation and information collection phase were then discussed in some detail with stakeholders and as a result a number of strategies and actions were initiated. These strategies are detailed in Section 7.

5.3 Phase 3: The Future

This report represents the output of the final phase of the project and while consolidating and reporting on the research and actions insights for future program development are provided. The recommendations are set out in detail in Section 8.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Poverty in the Manning Valley

This section addresses the issues affecting poverty in the region. The results of the research and consultations are considered in conjunction with the broader literature.

6.1.1 Financial Resources

The literature is clear that a shortage of money is fundamental to having a decent standard of living and reduces choices and opportunities. People living in poverty do not have enough money to cover basic necessities.

All service agency respondents implicitly understood this. The only specific comment was that social security (Centrelink) payments and policies were inadequate, particularly payments for single people and the aged.

Clients were very concerned with a lack of financial resources and this was the major issue they identified. The issues identified mainly related to the inability to pay essential bills and the lack of access to financial counselling and employment. It is clear that people have to make difficult choices between items that are considered essential or find themselves with overwhelming debt and bills. There was little direct comment on the social security system from clients.

6.1.2 Housing

Interestingly, housing was considered by both service and client respondents to be a major issue in the Manning - ahead of employment, health or education related issues.

The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)¹⁶ Survey data tells us that nearly all of the persistently poor live in rented accommodation and they most likely rent from a government housing authority¹⁷.

Affordability of decent accommodation, particularly rental accommodation, is a real problem for client respondents as was access to public housing. Additional issues around discrimination, poor housing conditions, lack of housing options and security were not raised in any detail; nonetheless, these are all factors that affect living standards.

Consultation with service agency personnel at the Interagency forums identified housing affordability, increasing rents, increasing gap between rent assistance and actual rents, covert discrimination (particularly discrimination on grounds of Aboriginality, mental health circumstances and age), the cost of relocation, and inadequate short term crisis accommodation (particularly for men) as the major housing issues in the region.

Homelessness is seen by service agencies as the thin edge of the wedge.

¹⁶ The HILDA Survey seeks to provide nationally representative longitudinal data on Australian residents describing the ways in which people's lives are changing. The Survey is funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

¹⁷ *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A statistical report on waves 1 to 6 of the HILDA study*. 2009. <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/statreport.html>

“[Homelessness] starts a spiral of events, no home, no base, no phone, unable to receive benefits, apply for jobs.”

6.1.3 Employment

A review of the literature documenting research into poverty in Australia confirms the intuitive opinion that unemployment is the principal cause of poverty among those of workforce age¹⁸. Peter Saunders writing in a Social Policy Research Centre discussion paper in 2006 states that employment is only an escape from poverty when it is full time, not part-time or casual¹⁹. Further evidence points towards employment where there is job satisfaction, choice and opportunity as necessary for sustained escape from poverty²⁰.

The lack of employment is closely related to the social security system. ACOSS research has identified that in 2004, 40.2 percent of jobless people and 31.5 percent of all people whose main income is social security lived below the poverty line²¹. The data is even more striking with regard to the persistently poor (2006) where the data shows that 67.2 percent of households where no-one was employed and 90.3 percent of households on income support (social security) were in the bottom quintile of living standards²².

As discussed in the Background section of this document unfortunately unemployment in the Manning Valley is higher than the national or state level of unemployment. Service agency personnel highlighted the lack of employment opportunities particularly in the more highly paid skilled labour market, the lack of opportunity to improve skill levels, the impact of intergenerational unemployment, the level of covert racial discrimination by potential employers and the loss of young people as they leave the area to seek suitable employment. The local labour market was not considered to be buoyant and the outlook for the future was not optimistic, although it was noted that the local Council is looking at avenues for the employment of unskilled labour.

6.1.4 Health

From the literature we know that general health is considerably poorer among people from low socio-economic groups. The poor bear a greater burden of disease. According to ACOSS this

¹⁸ Saunders, Peter. *A perennial problem: employment, joblessness and poverty*. www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DP146.pdf. ACOSS. *Facts about Poverty*. www.acoss.org.au Vinson, Tony. *Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*. 2007. *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A statistical report on waves 1 to 6 of the HILDA study*. 2009. <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/statreport.html>

¹⁹ Saunders, Peter. *A perennial problem: employment, joblessness and poverty*. www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DP146.pdf

²⁰ Saunders, Peter and others. *Experiencing Poverty: the voices of low-income Australians*. www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/reports/FinalReportMarch06.pdf

²¹ ACOSS. *Facts about Poverty*. www.acoss.org.au

²² *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A statistical report on waves 1 to 6 of the HILDA study*. 2009. <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/statreport.html>

burden is 31 percent higher than advantaged populations²³. HILDA data reveals that the rate of disability among the poor is more than double that of the non-poor²⁴. The HILDA research reports that the poor are over represented in both the under weight and obese categories of the body mass index and that low income does not reduce smoking as 36 percent of the poor were smokers as compare to 20 percent of the non-poor²⁵.

Aboriginal people have higher rates of ill health than any other group in Australia and generally this imbalance is not improving²⁶.

Local clients identified affordability as the key health issue facing them, particularly access to bulk billing GPs and low cost/ free medication. Clients were also most concerned with access to locally based health services, for example, many are faced with higher costs and negative family experiences associated with travel to Newcastle to access specialist services. Other health related issues raised by clients were the affordability of healthy food and difficulties in maintaining a healthy life style. Service providers identified the affordability of wholesome food and a ccess to emergency food relief as important issues affecting the health of people living below the poverty line.

Service agency personnel were concerned about mental health service accessibility and the impact of addiction on the community. Addiction / substance abuse is seen as a base cause of poverty in the region by a number of service agency personnel.

Service providers to the Indigenous community were most concerned about a lack of access to medical practitioners and the need for better health screening processes.

6.1.5 Education

Vinson identified early school leaving, limited computer use, limited internet access, incomplete year 12 schooling and a lack of post-school qualifications as major characteristics of NSW's most disadvantaged postcode areas²⁷. This is supported by the HILDA research that reinforces that the poor tend to have low educational attainment²⁸. As highlighted in Section 3 the Greater Taree population census information unfortunately shows that in our region we have a lower than the NSW average of the population with post-secondary qualifications²⁹. Similarly, the region has

²³ ACOSS. *Facts about Poverty*. www.acoss.org.au

²⁴ *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A statistical report on waves 1 to 6 of the HILDA study*. 2009. <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/statreport.htm>

²⁵ *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A statistical report on waves 1 to 6 of the HILDA study*. 2009. <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/statreport.htm>

²⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission. *A statistical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia*. 2006. http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Social_Justice/statistics/index.html#toc41

²⁷ Vinson, Tony. *Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*. 2007.

²⁸ *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A statistical report on waves 1 to 6 of the HILDA study*. 2009. <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/statreport.htm>

²⁹ ABS. *National Regional Profile*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>

lower than average access to the Internet at home³⁰. Education and educational opportunities must therefore be of concern to both service agencies and their clients.

Clients however did not report education as a key issue. This may be explained by the request to only provide two key issues and more immediate issues were top of mind and therefore it should not be considered that access to quality education is not a key issue for clients.

Service providers did note the importance of education. It was particularly noted that a major problem is truancy and the need to come up with creative ways to keep children at school particularly focussing on the primary school years to develop a culture and love of learning. The level of suspension and expulsion and the subsequent boredom and often vandalism and criminal activity was noted. The cost of school uniforms and materials was also raised in the consultations.

6.1.6 Transport

Access to transport is another significant factor affecting poverty in our region. Lack of adequate transport is seen as a key problem, particularly by local service providers. Adequate transport is important for not only accessing employment but to enable access to health and other services, and social/recreational activities.

A number of quite complex transport related issues were raised during service provider consultations. These included affordability of a vehicle, the inadequacy of public transport particularly to outlying villages where clients often rely on school buses to attend appointments (particularly as service providers are not funded to outreach in this large geographical area) and inadequate affordable after hours and weekend transport options.

6.1.7 Community and Social Engagement

Affordable social and recreational opportunities are important to a decent standard of living and many people living in poverty miss out. Consequently, the poor are often excluded from meeting new people and are at risk of social isolation and depression³¹.

Service providers identified the need for low cost community development projects to reduce the barriers to community and social engagement. Local Indigenous community service providers noted that accessible activities for children and youth were necessary.

6.2 Issues in relation to Services in the Manning Valley

The other fundamental aspect of this phase of the project was to identify gaps in service provision and how service agencies can work more effectively to support people affected by poverty in the Manning Valley.

6.2.1 Gaps in Services

Both service providers and clients were asked about their perception of gaps in local service delivery and they identified the following service gaps.

³⁰ ABS. *National Regional Profile*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/>

³¹ Saunders, Peter and others. *Experiencing Poverty: the voices of low-income Australians*. www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/reports/FinalReportMarch06.pdf

6.2.1.1 Mental Health / Health

At the time of the questionnaire new arrangements regarding mental health referrals and Medicare benefits for mental health care plans were introduced by Government. NSW Health had also recently re-focussed on mental health issues and developed action plans accordingly. This all coincided with a local mental health forum. There was some confusion and lack of information on how these new programs would work in practice in the region amongst service provider personnel. There was concern about potentially inappropriate referrals and the need for community education and agency training was identified.

Both clients and service providers saw the need for improved access to counselling services. There was a perceived lack of specialist counselling services. Service providers particularly noted a large number of inappropriate referrals and lack of knowledge of counselling service providers.

Clients participating in the survey did not specifically raise concerns about other gaps in mental health services. This is not to say that there is no issue for clients but for those clients surveyed general health affordability was the main health related concern and this was a significant concern. Specifically, clients considered there was a need for more GP and bulk billing health services.

6.2.1.2 Social Isolation

Service providers were concerned that people living in poverty face social isolation due to the higher cost of housing in town, inadequate and high cost transport, mental illness, and relationship breakdowns. They identified a lack of services in outlying areas, non-optimal use of local resources and facilities, and the lack of after hours and weekend services and recreation for the aged, disadvantaged and people with a disability as areas of need.

6.2.1.3 Drug and Alcohol Addiction

Addiction was perceived as a major social problem and a barrier to social inclusion by the service provider community. Service providers felt that there was a need for more education and preventative measures for children. Service providers also thought there was a need for enhanced programs for parents affected by substance abuse and additional support for their children. Clients identified the need for support services for drug and alcohol dependency.

6.2.1.4 Transport

It was noted that the Manning is a large geographical area and transport services were considered inadequate by a significant portion of local service providers. The specific gaps were identified in the provision of services to outlying communities, Taree South and the Bushland Housing Estate and after hours services. The need for agencies and private transport providers to share resources and improve information exchange on schedules and routes was identified.

Taree South (Purfleet) and the housing estate were highlighted as specific examples of how a community can be relatively close to the CBD but far enough to be isolated.

“The Purfleet community have attempted to get a pedestrian crossing at the roundabout as well as a regular bus route. Many members of the community rely on taxis or hitching (including young people).”

6.2.1.5 Housing

While housing was considered by both clients and service providers as a major issue affecting poverty in the region it was primarily the clients that identified gaps in housing services. Clients want more accommodation options at the lower end of the market and shorter public housing waiting lists. The need for additional specific support services such as housekeeping, cooking and budgeting to support housing sustainability for the Indigenous community was identified.

6.2.1.6 Legal

Clients were concerned with the accessibility of low cost or free legal services. Many people who had a need for legal advice and support were not able to access any advice. The service provided from Newcastle is difficult to access due to transport constraints and the limitations of the outreach service.

The cost of legal advice and services was a major issue for clients and clients particularly identified the need for local community legal services. This need was also identified by service providers and a separate project to undertake a needs analysis for a community legal centre to be based on the Mid North Coast was initiated.

6.2.1.7 Domestic Violence

Service providers were concerned about ongoing breaches of AVOs and identified the need for more information programs for school aged children. There was a call for improved information and resources on exit strategies for people wishing to leave violent relationships. Service providers also felt that they should work more collaboratively with the Police to closely manage referrals and implement initiative programs with a view to shift community attitudes.

Service providers were most concerned about the recent loss of locally based services to support victims of Domestic Violence.

6.2.1.8 Education

The provision of free tutoring, after hours workshops to assist children and parents with homework and initiatives to help keep children and youth at school were identified as educational needs. School suspension and expulsion policies were considered to be ineffective.

6.2.1.9 Children and Youth Services

A significant proportion of service providers identified the need for more services for children and youth such as after-hours programs and additional events and shows. It was considered that funding needs to be better targeted, especially for Aboriginal youth programs.

6.2.2 Networking

It is essential that agencies work with each other and share information to ensure comprehensive service provision to clients and the delivery of quality programs. The Manning Valley Interagency Forum is a valuable mechanism for the sharing of information amongst service providers in the Manning. Members of Interagency were actively involved throughout the course of this project, however significant gaps in service provider knowledge of other services was identified.

A significant number of survey respondents (service providers) noted that they often did not attend Interagency meetings due to time constraints. Equally, respondents saw the value of the networking and information sharing forum and were keen to continue to receive minutes and emails.

Specifically, service providers considered that there was a greater need for networking to improve service knowledge and planning in the areas of counselling, transport, and housing bond and tenancy guarantee services.

7. PROJECT ACTION

The outcomes of the information gathering phase of the project were considered by the Steering Committee and the Committee identified a number of key activities to focus on. These activities were not considered to be the only actions that were necessary and the Manning Valley Interagency was asked to take account of the research findings in the development of their programs and initiatives. This section details the actions implemented and documents other strategies discussed by Manning Valley Interagency.

7.1 Facilitation and Secretariat support for Manning Valley Interagency

A major activity of the project worker was to facilitate and support the ongoing development of the Manning Valley Interagency. We are pleased to be able to report that attendance at the regular meetings of Interagency has improved and remains relatively representative of agencies in our region. MVNS will continue to facilitate Manning Valley Interagency.

Special interest groups in the areas of emergency relief and transport have been re-established and maintained. The Transport Special Interest Group with the support of the project worker has implemented strategies to improve transport co-ordination, options and information exchange. A detailed transport directory has been compiled and disseminated to stakeholders. The Emergency Relief Special Interest Group has developed mechanisms to improve information sharing regarding the availability of relief resources.

7.2 Counselling Services Directory

The need for a guide of local counselling services which details service programs, including which clients are supported, and how to access programs was identified by the Steering Committee as a high priority and was a very specific and focussed deliverable.

The Directory is scheduled to be released in October 2009. The Directory provides contact and referral details on counselling services in the following categories: free services, support and self help services, parenting support services, crisis services, addiction specific services, specialist services, and privately provided services.

7.3 Community Services Information and Training

A major initiative of the Interagency Project was the facilitation of a training and information day for service providers. This very successful day (titled *CPR [connections, pathways, reflections] for Community Services*) was held during May 2009.

CPR for Community Services provided an opportunity for networking, information sharing and relationship building. Guest speakers spoke on the benefits of maintaining networks and developing effective referral pathways. An output of the day was a Services Toolkit for participant information to be disseminated to all attendees. The Toolkit is published on the MVNS website. Another outcome was the establishment of focus groups and working parties to continue to work to fill gaps in service delivery.

The project worker advocated strongly for the on-going commitment by service agencies to maintaining and enhancing Council's directory of community services published on Council's website.

Evaluation of *CPR for Community Services* was positive with many requests for the event to be held on an annual basis.

“new connections”, “met people from other services I was unaware of”, “networking opportunity to see what others are doing”.

7.4 Community Expo

The project team worked in collaboration with Valley Industries, Dundaloo Foundation, Break Thru Employment and LinC Manning Valley to stage a Community Services Expo. The Expo was an opportunity for service providers to showcase their organisation and their various programs. The Expo provided an opportunity to raise the profile of nearly 50 local services.

Clients were able to find out about local services, discuss their situation with service providers and participate in fun activities and workshops.

“This is a great idea – it would be great if it could happen every year.”

7.5 Feasibility Study into a ‘Bank’ of Resources for Emergency Relief

Research by the project worker and the experience of the MVNS emergency relief program confirmed the perception that local emergency relief services are unable to fully meet the increasing demand for material aid.

As a project action, a feasibility study was undertaken to assess current services, research the Foodbank Australia program, identify issues and risks and make recommendations regarding the provision of food relief services in the Manning Valley. The project worker consulted widely with stakeholders including the providers of existing services in the region.

The study concluded that the local community would benefit from an additional emergency relief service providing wholesome food to people affected by poverty. It was recommended that this service be located at Wingham in order to supplement the Taree based services. It is expected that the MVNS will implement a program as recommended.

7.6 Other Actions

The project initiated a number of other programs and activities to support the project objectives of developing supportive networks, advocate priorities and community building. These included the provision of training for volunteer based agencies in submission writing and project management, advocacy for regular mental health forums to inform services of changes in mental health policy, and advocacy and co-ordination of the Community Drug Action Team (CDAT) program.

7.7 Initiatives discussed by Interagency

In their capacity as an advisory committee and major stakeholder the Manning Valley Interagency generated a number of ideas for future programs, advocacy, lobbying activity and community development.

These included (in no particular order); the provision of culturally sensitive training to service providers on mental health issues, the provision of mental health first aid training to volunteer organisations, the conduct of a needs analysis on community outreach services, lobby funding providers for the provision of outreach services, ideas for increased recreational activities of an evening and weekends, school based education relating to violence, improved partnerships and case management across multiple agencies, mapping of transport services, lobby relevant Government agencies for improved transport services, provision of after-hours workshops for parents who struggle to support their children undertaking homework and assignments, and review of the effective use of school timeout rooms.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Limitations

The Interagency project successfully consulted with a wide and representative range of service providers through the questionnaire process, service provider workshops and the Interagency forum. Unfortunately respondents did not provide rankings when asked about poverty traps in the Manning therefore we are unable to determine which of the factors affecting poverty were the most concerning to service providers.

The level of consultation with clients and potential clients was limited to a cohort of clients who self identified as living in poverty. Nonetheless, what clients were telling us does correlate with published research.

Despite these qualifications some very valuable information has emerged and the project has been successful in identifying the factors that are barriers to escaping poverty and gaps in services in the Manning Valley region.

8.2 Summary of Findings

Housing affordability was a major factor that emerged as affecting the standard of living and the choices and sacrifices that had to be made by people affected by poverty. The level of homelessness in the region was of concern.

Clients were concerned with access to low cost health care whereas service providers were very concerned with mental health policies, how these policies would work in practice and how clients could be supported in accessing mental health services.

The lack of cheap and adequate transport is seen as a key issue affecting poverty in our region. The availability of transport influences the ability of people living in poverty to obtain and retain employment, access services and to effectively participate in the community.

Education is an important way of increasing employment prospects; however, there was significant concern that children are missing out on educational opportunities. Service providers were

concerned about improving the school experience for children, the need to improve school attendance and the management of disruptive and suspended students.

Clients were mainly concerned with day to day living expenses; how to pay the bills, how to pay the credit card, what sacrifices have to be made etc. Clients were seeking access to financial counselling and they wanted employment.

Although by no means the only factor in breaking out of poverty, employment nonetheless is the major factor. Despite a growing number of working poor most people in full time employment do not live in poverty. There is significant evidence that full time, permanent and skilled employment is important for a decent standard of living and sense of personal fulfilment. Unfortunately the Manning Valley region experiences higher than average unemployment and many of the employment opportunities that do exist pay relatively low wages.

8.3 Summary of Gaps and Strategies for Services

It is recognised that there are a number of service providers in our region offering high quality services; however, within this context, the need to share information and to work collaboratively to achieve common objectives was acknowledged. One of the major objectives of this project was to enhance and enliven existing networks and forums to promote a self-supporting system resulting in idea generation, leadership and advocacy on issues. This was achieved through the Manning Interagency forum, the establishment of new sub-committees to address areas of specific interest, and the conduct of workshops and training. In particular, the *CPR for Services* workshop and training day was considered a resounding success by attendees³².

Specific gaps in services were identified around the areas of mental health, transport, social isolation, information regarding counselling services, legal services, addiction, domestic violence and youth services. A number of manageable strategies were able to be successfully implemented. These included the development of a counselling services directory, the provision of mental health first aid training to volunteer organisations, the development of a services toolkit, the organisation of a community services expo and the undertaking of a feasibility study into the provision of food based emergency relief. Other organisations have taken up issues such as the need for accessible and affordable legal services.

³² Based on formal attendee evaluations.

8.4 For the Future

Given the time and resource constraints all areas identified or ideas discussed were not able to be progressed. Nonetheless, this project report provides valuable insight into potential priority areas for the development of agency strategic plans. For example, the MVNS Management Committee has reviewed their strategic plan and placed greater emphasis on the delivery of strategies to improve the health of people on low incomes by providing access to cheap wholesome food, food nutrition and cooking information and programs, information on how to manage the budget to purchase healthy foods and a community garden initiative.

In summary, and notwithstanding the limitations of the local labour market, the findings of this report support the consideration of strategic programs in the areas of:

- Housing affordability and homelessness - potentially more research focussed specifically on housing in the Manning;
- Information dissemination regarding available services, particularly financial counselling, mental health, domestic violence and drug and alcohol support services;
- Emergency relief – wholistic emergency relief programs delivered by collaborating service providers;
- Healthy lifestyle and nutritious food choice and preparation, including programs for the Aboriginal community;
- Transport - affordability, planning, comprehensive geographical coverage and co-ordination;
- Domestic Violence – monitor the effectiveness of outreach services and initiate lobbying or supplementary programs if necessary;
- School retention and programs aimed at improving school attendance and reducing the negative impact of suspension from school;
- Social and community engagement initiatives, especially for children, youth and people with disabilities;
- Legal Services - continued advocacy and action to progress the provision of a Community Legal Service on the Mid North Coast;
- Maintenance and enhancement of existing networking forums (such as Manning Interagency); and
- On-going provision of sector wide workshops, seminars and training for service agency personnel.

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