

Sustaining community wellbeing in drought

Southern Grampians and Glenelg: Climate change adaptation framework



Fresh approaches to assist drought-affected communities

By publishing these case studies Victoria's Department of Human Services aims to share what has been learnt from the State Government's *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought* program funded in the 2007–2008 financial year.

The program, involving 19 Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs) in 47 rural and regional local government areas, was part of the department's broader drought response.

The department is keen for others to be inspired by positive experiences gained from it.

The Southern Grampians and Glenelg region used *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought* funding for local interventions such as drought counselling, Mental Health First Aid training and for developing and coordinating a range of drought-related initiatives.

One key development was creating the Drought Postcard Initiative which connected local school children and farmers with mental health promotion messages. This was so successful that this region helped others to follow suit.

An outcome of the region's drought coordination and learning was the development of a *Climate Change Adaptation Framework for Local Action*. This provides a good practice example of identification of evidence-based priorities for local drought-affected communities.

Based on integrated service partnerships to deliver drought-assistance and health promotion initiatives, the approach has promoted collaboration on achieving strategic local service goals.

The region

Local communities in the Southern Grampians and Glenelg region in south-west Victoria have been detrimentally impacted by climate change and rural adjustment. The region has been characterised as a 'transition landscape'¹ with local adjustments including rapid land use change, decline in townships, young people leaving, a decreasing number of farmers with an increasing average age, incoming

low socio-economic groups drawn by housing affordability, and low social 'bridging capital' (ie connection with others outside of area).²

Effects of drought and services centralisation have resulted in a decrease in town infrastructure, including its services. Identified local health impacts from drought have included increased heat-related illness, stress, anxiety and other mental health issues, limited participation in leisure and recreation and reduced connection to nature.³

1 Rowe, R. & Thomas, A. (August 2008) *Policy Signpost #3: Climate Change Adaptation—A Framework for Local Action*, The McCaughey Centre, Melbourne, p.10.

2 Barr, N. (2005) *Understanding Rural Victoria*, State of Victoria, Department of Primary Industries.

3 Rowe, R. (October 2008) *Climate Change Adaptation—Framework for local action* slideshow

Sustaining community wellbeing in drought

Southern Grampians and Glenelg: Climate change adaptation framework

Background

In December 2006 the Western District Health Service established the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Drought Committee in response to agency concerns about the impact of drought on local communities.

The committee, supported by the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Primary Care Partnership has grown to now include a broad range of stakeholders from multiple sectors with a combination of senior staff (with influence and fund raising capacity) and operational 'hands on' people with local experience and an ability to 'get on and do'.

- Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)
- Balmoral Bush Nursing Centre
- Centrelink
- Country Fire Authority (CFA)
- Community Connections
- Department of Primary Industries (DPI)
- Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority (CMA)
- Glenelg Shire
- Otway Division of General Practice
- Rural Industries Skills Training (RIST)
- Southern Grampians Shire
- Southern Grampians and Glenelg Primary Care Partnership (SGG PCP)
- South West Rural Financial Counselling Service—Wimmera South West
- Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF)
- Western District Health Service (WDHS)
- Wannon Water

Initiatives: building community capacity by post

Using combined resources, the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Drought Committee initiated various local activities to build greater capacity within local communities to deal with the impact of drought.

During 2007 and 2008, community capacity building activities and interventions have included:

- 120 Farm Gate⁴ visits to farmers
- eight Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)⁵ training sessions
- six community-based Farmer Nights
- four business forums or breakfasts
- two gardening Workshops
- leadership of the now state-wide Drought Postcard initiative.

The Drought Postcard Initiative is an example of effective health promotion partnering with the education sector.

Before Christmas in 2006, students from nine local primary schools sent personalised postcards to 1,000 farmers near Balmoral, Casterton, Coleraine, Hamilton and Dunkeld. As well as providing simple, helpful, supportive mental health messages and information, the postcards contained students' personal messages of hope which encouraged farmers with a sense of local community support.

An additional positive outcome was that students not only enjoyed designing, writing and sending the postcards, but by reading and discussing the simple health messages, learned that ringing a friend, being active, listening to music or enjoying a hobby, were examples of positive health behaviours.

News of the success of the postcard initiative spread. In June/July 2007, with coordination support from Southern Grampians and Glenelg Primary Care Partnership (PCP) and collaboration with 14 other Primary Care Partnerships, schools from across Victoria sent postcards with positive health information messages to 20,000 farmers.

Mensline South Australia also adopted the idea, with children sending a card to their fathers.⁶ As an innovative and relatively low-cost communication method, the concept proved successful in gaining widespread interest, publicity and general support for the farming community in a time of drought.

Climate Change Adaptation framework

The Southern Grampians and Glenelg Primary Care Partnership (SGG PCP) recognised that the risk of a scattered funding approach was the duplication of under-resourced, uncoordinated, small-scale initiatives which were likely to have reduced or limited outcomes.

So, to ensure that drought funding received in the region would be used to maximum effect and result in positive outcomes, they adopted an integrated, collaborative approach to the application and distribution of the funds.

Their approach was developed between December 2007 and February 2008, in collaboration with The University of Melbourne, into the *Climate Change Adaptation Framework for Local Action* and associated Action Plan⁷.

The framework provided a strategic planning tool and pathway for actions which will support community resilience in the face of the health, social,

4 See Campaspe Farm Gate project: Assertive outreach

5 The Mental Health First Aid training is a 12 hour course aimed at building the mental health literacy and service knowledge of non-mental health professionals across communities.

6 Southern Grampians and Glenelg Primary Care Partnership (SGG PCP) 2007, Postcards help during Drought, Media Release, July 2007.

7 Rowe, Rosie & Thomas, Anita (August 2008) *Policy Signpost #3: Climate Change Adaptation—A Framework for Local Action*, The McCaughey Centre, Melbourne.

environmental and economic impacts of climate change and rural adjustment.

It required identifying priority issues related to local climate change/rural adjustment and placing these priorities at the centre of a drought plan to guide local initiatives implemented through integrated planning and cross-sector partnerships.

Enacted by a local consortium of organisations, with funding allocation informed by the priorities of the drought plan, the framework provided the basis for a sustainable, collaborative and integrated approach.

In this region the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Drought Committee, with support from the SGG PCP, is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the framework.

The five local priority issues reflected in the *Climate Change Adaptation Framework for Local Action* in this region were household energy, household water use, transport, affordable food supply and community strength and resilience.

Figure 1: CCA Framework



Positive impacts

The diverse membership of the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Drought Committee, which includes farmers with personal drought experience, has increased mutual understanding and peer learning between committee members and capitalised on ongoing commitments to supporting rural people in a changing environment.

Over an 18-month period, the committee combined funds totalling \$200,000 from seven organisations to fund collaborative initiatives and build community capacity.

This committee's experience and credibility ensured a collaborative, cross-sector approach to the development of the *Climate Change Adaptation Framework for Local Action* and efficient use of resources.

Drought Committee members continue to encourage local participation in the Sustainable Farm Families program⁸ run by the Western District Health Service, whose counselling service has increased access by introducing an evening session during the week. Approximately 25% of the caseload have been from the farming sector. Clinicians report that the session has been well received.

Other positive drought initiative outcomes include the establishment of a Drought Committee working group of SGG PCP drought counsellors and people from the Primary Mental Health Team, Western District Health Service, Community Connections and Otway Division of General Practice Counsellors.

This group partners the Drought Committee's local community and non-health sector organisations in the 'funnel' project which started in June 2008 with the theme, 'looking after yourself and others in the community'.

The project aimed to build community capacity by skilling non-health professionals to 'funnel' referrals to General Practitioners (GPs) and other support services. It complements existing programs such as Farm Gate and Sustainable Farm Families.

Three local organisations continue to partner and undertake Farm Gate visits.

Evidence of project sustainability includes the growth of Drought Committee membership (with new members including catchment management authorities and the Department of Primary Industries) and ongoing attendance at meetings.

Lessons learned

The drought counsellors' working group undertook a needs analysis of professionals in daily contact with farming families and businesses, such as stock agents, VFF, CFA and CMA staff, to investigate how to connect with people who might not otherwise be reached by key messages and information about stress and mental health.

In part, the analysis revealed that existing capacity development programs like Mental Health First Aid or 'No Bull Support' approaches (see *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought's* Campaspe Farm Gate project) were too intensive, clinical or time-consuming for these professionals.

The Drought Committee, VFF, CFA and DPI collaborated in their response to this analysis, producing a two-pronged approach—a Generic Workshop and 'community days'.

The Primary Mental Health Team developed, and is piloting, a Generic Workshop which can be adapted to suit professionals working in different organisations, depending on their

⁸ Sustainable Farm Families (SFF) is a health education and development program that targets viable farming families.

Sustaining community wellbeing in drought

Southern Grampians and Glenelg: Climate change adaptation framework

information needs. Using Sustaining Community Wellbeing extension funding, the team coordinates the initiative, designs and delivers the workshops and evaluates the pilot.

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) has also contributed, providing Looking Out for Your Neighbour program funding for the first of a series of planned 'community days' aimed at strengthening a sense of belonging, and promoting the message about looking after oneself and one another.

A sustainable, 'community day' activity is currently being piloted in three local areas—Balmoral, Victoria Valley and Willoura. Part of the event at Balmoral was a film night screening a locally-produced slide show about the Balmoral community, preceded by a message about stress management. A local working group plans to run this event next year—making it bigger and better.

Other key learnings include that the Farm Gate approach has broadened practitioners' views and affected how they work, and that the use of Service Coordination⁹ to support referrals has been very important.

The success of *Climate Change Adaptation* collaborative work in drought has also helped the SG PCP to attract further funds to the local area to address the social and health impacts of climate change. For example:

- ▶ The Primary Care Partnership was selected along with nine other PCPs to participate in a pilot project for the Victorian Heatwave Strategy. The strategy identifies who is most vulnerable, how to best alert them, how they should respond to reduce the risk and what recovery plans are required. Results of the pilots will be used to develop local government resources for distribution across the State.
- ▶ Research funds were received from the Handbury Fellowship for a community development pilot project within a small town with a vulnerable population, to increase community access to services, food security and so forth.
- ▶ Southern Grampians Shire has contracted the PCP to undertake work for its climate change funding, providing assistance such as counselling for vulnerable older clients.

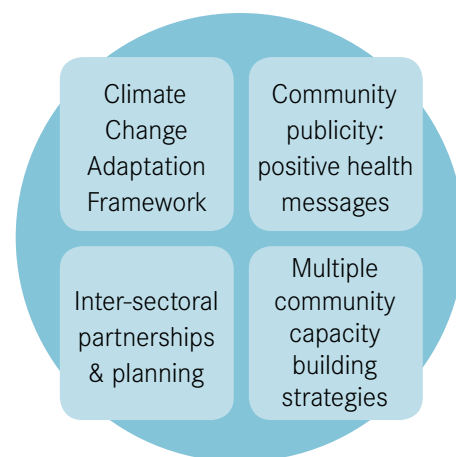
Conclusion

The Southern Grampians and Glenelg experience is an informative case study of coordinated drought planning.

Key achievements from the approach include the Drought Postcard Initiative, connecting school children with local farmers to promote mental health messages, and the development of the *Climate Change Adaptation* framework that has informed local integrated planning for drought interventions.

Collaboration and funding coordination has ensured a focus on identified priorities and strategic, targeted interventions. The comprehensive approach has enabled services to address both the current impacts of sustained drought, and the ongoing vulnerability and disadvantage due to climate change.

Figure 2: Key messages



The information contained in this case study, in particular the **priorities-based, coordinated approach to drought planning and key interventions**, adds to the body of evidence available to services and practitioners across Victoria.

⁹ Agreed practices between agencies around the way services are coordinated

Acknowledgements

The provision of information from the following sources is gratefully acknowledged: Acting Executive Officer, Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP; Drought Committee member, Australian Veterinary Association; Director and Senior Counsellor, Western District Health Service; Manager Economic Development and Tourism, Southern Grampians Shire Council; Manager, Primary Mental Health Team, South West Health Care.