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Finding treasure: the power of community in rural health and wellbeing

Fae Robinson

Fae Robinson Futures

Abstract

Deep understanding and empowerment of communities is the essential, and often overlooked, platform for driving long-term gains in health and wellbeing. Communities underpin the vital social connections needed to maintain good physical and mental health, provide unique and specific insights into the issues and relationships challenging local people, and have both intrinsic and extrinsic 'power' to make real change, particularly in rural settings. Giving voice to that power across Aboriginal people, descendent families, more recent arrivals, young and old—all the stories that together make the place unique—is an imperative for preventing ill-health and promoting good health and wellbeing in rural communities.

In an immersive project in rural Tasmania, the local Council permitted a deep dive into its diverse communities, using general public consultation, special interest group consultation and more than 60 one-on-one interviews across sectors—federal, state and local governments, business, not-for-profit, and local citizens from all walks of life and in varying states of physical or mental health. Surveys and written submissions also contributed to the community knowledge base.

In this extensive process of engagement, local histories threw light on the contemporary health and wellbeing status of diverse communities; long-held traditions and traditional knowledge supported equality; and pockets of innovation provided new ways to address wicked problems.

The result is a revelation—communities ready and able to connect with, and respond to, the health and wellbeing of their local populations. Their knowledge, ideas and expertise are a springboard for action; their deep commitment defines their sense of community and the real possibility of a sustainable, healthy future. Community provides the key ingredient to community wellness.

The insights and understanding gained from the engagement process, the key role of Council, and the role of consultant converge to provide a direction-setting health and wellbeing strategy that focuses on wellness, prevention, community and strengths, and demonstrates how to be better together. The presentation will provide insights into the engagement process, the defining moments, the foresight of Council, the wisdom of community and the role of trust in shaping the strategy. It will chart a socially determined, community driven pathway to wellness for a rural Tasmanian community.

A special place

This project is set in the Huon Valley, a relatively small rural municipality just south of Hobart, Tasmania. The 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Census data¹ reports that 16,199 people lived in the Valley at that time. The population is dispersed across larger townships and smaller hamlets including Huonville, Dover, Cygnet, Geeveston, Ranelagh and Franklin; each has its own population mix, challenges and opportunities—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (over nine per cent of the population [ABS]); people with disability; LGBTI people; people with varying education expectations and achievements and with very different socio-economic experiences. The age distribution of the Huon Valley population suggests that young people are leaving the Valley for other opportunities, while peak population groups are in the younger years and people aged from their 40s to their 70s.

The Huon Valley of the 1980s was described as 'a very traditional, remote, close-knit Tasmanian community' with 'less than 6000 people south of Kingston' (a southern suburb of Hobart). Conversations with locals described the population growing rapidly over the last 40 or so years: the original descendent families were joined by 'a wave of hippies' in the 1970s and 'sea-changers/tree-changers' came from about the 2000s on, mostly retirees or semi-retired people. One television morning show put the Huon Valley in their Top 10 of places to retire to in Australia. More recent growth has included 'millennials'—those born between about 1981 and 1996, described as tradies or commuters to city jobs.

The art of conversation

Over about 15 weeks in 2018 I engaged with 12 community and stakeholder groups and had conversations with over 60 people living and/or working in the Huon Valley. Initially the take-up for the community and stakeholder sessions was limited, leading to a series of one-on-one conversations with key community members. This deep dive focused on gaining understanding of the community and organisational heartbeat of the Valley.

The engagement and conversations were informed by three principles: wellness, prevention and community; and a framework called THRIVE (Tool for Health and Resilience in Vulnerable Environments).² THRIVE increases understanding of the underlying factors that impact people, the places where they live and work, and their economic and education opportunities. Using the THRIVE model ensured all sections of the community were authentically engaged and could contribute to sustainable strategies to improve health and wellbeing.

The conversations revealed the Huon Valley as a collection of dynamic communities taking action on things that matter to them. There was enormous energy around, and commitment to, community wellbeing. The community was described as 'resilient and adaptive', with a 'strong sense of community spirit', where 'people look after each other'. There were many examples of individuals, groups, organisations, schools and businesses creating support in their local communities—driven for the community by the community.

Capacity on which to build

The engagement process shone a light on the fantastic store of knowledge, skill and practical experience in the Valley—some of it new knowledge from the influx of semi- and fully retired people; some of it building on traditions in industries like agriculture, aquaculture and wooden boat building.

Considerable institutional strengths were also revealed. There is a level and quality of service provision across many sectors, or plans in train to address gaps. The Service Provider Network, which connects people with resources and providers best suited to their needs, coordinates a website, bi-monthly meetings, a weekly newsletter, and The Right Place (which supports people to find the services they need, when they need them). Since 2015, the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services has been trialing the Joined Up Human Services project with the aim of improving Tasmania's human services system. It works in partnership with the community sector, clients and the broader community through creating a strong, collaborative, cooperative service system based on information sharing, trust, better understanding of clients, and strengthened connections.

The role of insight and ideas

Identifying expertise and exploring ideas at the local and global level were key to the strategy development process. There were many inspirational conversations with practitioners working in Tasmania who provided their wisdom and observations about how to achieve health and wellness at the community level; research revealed insights and ideas from some key national and international thinkers and doers.

The knowledge, expertise and experience in the public health realm of Sir Harry Burns helped to shift the emphasis from pathogenesis (factors that cause disease) to salutogenesis (factors that support human health and wellbeing). Sir Harry's work contributed understanding of the value of meaning and purpose in human health and wellness; clearly explained the science of epigenetics; and encouraged the idea of listening to and acting on the knowledge and experience of practitioners at the frontline.³

Dr Martin Seligman's work on positive psychology helped to understand how we can reorient our view of the world, develop natural buffers against misfortune and negative emotion and better imbue our lives with meaning.⁴ His work in the educational sphere using PERMA—**P**ositive emotions, **E**ngagement (flow), positive **R**elationships, **M**eaning (and purpose), and **A**ccomplishment, was of particular interest.

The role and value of social groups to health and wellness was revealed through the work of Professor Alex Haslam and his colleagues at the University of Queensland. Their work looks at how social group membership and social identity influence health and can provide the basis for 'social cures'. Professor Haslam reports social isolation is a greater health threat than smoking, poor diet and lack of exercise.⁵

Dr Laura Jana threw light on the type of skills we need to nurture in children to ensure they succeed in the future. She described parents as 'chief engagement officers' and emphasised the importance of supporting parents who don't have the skills.⁶

Discovering Shareable⁷ and its ideas and actions around community transformation strengthened a belief in the power of collaboration to address wicked problems and to make a difference to health and wellness; Collective Impact 3.0 and understanding community readiness helped guide thinking about the best ways forward.

In *Switch: How to change things when change is hard* authors Chip and Dan Heath⁸ contend 'What looks like a people problem is often a situation problem'. Their book describes the power of 'bright spots' and inspired the search for clever local activities as a way to help navigate behavioural change.

There were some notable bright spots revealed in the Huon Valley:

- SETAC—services the community from a holistic perspective
- Bendigo Bank—has returned more than \$2.1 million to the community over its 15 years of service
- Geeveston Community Centre (GeCo)—its 27 different funded programs make a multi-faceted contribution to the Huon community with true community development approaches
- Salvation Army Drop-In Centre—provides food relief and social and other support to those in need in Huonville; Chatterbox is a program devised for girls in years 5 & 6
- Service Providers Network—connects service providers for the wellbeing of individuals and the community
- Cygnet Hub—meets people where they're at and connects them to services and resources
- Huon LINC—provides accessible knowledge connections
- Zayed Huon Energy Futures Team—provides an energy-efficient, sustainable vision for the Huon Valley, focusing on change at the community level
- Trade Training Centre—provides a place of aspiration, change and upskilling
- Schools—connect with communities, families, young people and children
- Huon Regional Care—is a participator and facilitator of integrated health services
- Geeveston Cares—aims to 'put a smile on someone's face' and is generously supported by business
- Living Boat Trust—is a vibrant community-based organisation that draws on the wooden boating history of the Valley
- Tassie Teens—provides an online resource for young people
- wayraparattee—the Child and Family Centre at Geeveston that is an educational and community hub

Council as connector

The recent past was a period of turmoil for the Huon Valley Council. At the time of the project Council was administered by a Commissioner who was highly regarded across the community. Given resolution of the earlier turmoil, there were expectations that Council could deliver on increased community involvement and participation in decision-making, and community empowerment. Council was described as 'having the capacity to make change' with a big role, but not the only role, in building health and wellbeing—it is 'uniquely placed to be a community leader'.

People saw Council as 'important to the health and wellbeing strategy by ensuring the community is part of it and providing mechanisms that people want to be part of'. The conversations revealed a strong desire for people and communities to be listened to and heard in a different way. Some

recognised their experiences may have been tainted by the previous Council, but there was a clear message that ‘people need to be heard to be able to influence the future’; ‘to work where the energy, interests and needs are’; that ‘community initiatives need to be driven by people who live here’; ‘the role of trusted groups’ should be considered. In essence, the community told me that *how* Council considers its role and relationship to community was key to guiding *what* gets done.

An experimental approach

The capacity of the community and the desire for increased participation in decision-making led me to suggest an ‘out-of-scope’ proposal for the strategy. There were clear community strengths, notable bright spots and an option to leverage these assets, particularly with Council in the role of connector, enabler and informer.

The key to this approach was partnerships—eight partnerships led by and with community across eight targeted health and wellness priority areas. These areas emerged through the analysis of data, policy directions and particularly community and stakeholder engagement. A partnership structure was proposed which drew on the diverse expertise and experiences of the community. Shared vision and values, and trust, were a key part of the approach, as was Council’s role in providing partnership support.

In proposing this approach, I drew on my conversations and engagement with residents, service providers, business people, government and those experienced in health and wellbeing strategy development. Two key issues had emerged:

- Huon Valley residents were generally seeking more involvement in decision-making in their local communities
- Government representatives, academics, service providers and community organisations in the Valley who are working in and with communities identified increased community decision-making as essential to effective and successful strategy development and implementation.

It was an ambitious approach and a big step for any council to take, particularly for a first-time health and wellbeing strategy. The benefits and risks of the approach were carefully assessed and evaluated, including the need for further capacity building and support for Council and the community. Huon Valley Council gave it generous consideration and indicated ‘support for the concept of working towards an empowerment model of engagement with the community’.

Directions for change

While the first suggested approach focused as much on *how* the strategy could be most effectively delivered as it did on *what* ‘should’ be delivered, the revised approach focuses more on *what* needs to be addressed while recognising the importance of *how* the community is engaged in delivery. The support from Council for moving towards an empowerment model was an important component in achieving this hybrid model.

The agreed approach emphasises the value and power of connections encapsulated as three Priorities: *Connecting People*, *Connecting to Place*, and *Connecting Knowledge and Know-How*:

Connecting People emphasises the importance of strong relationships and social connections for good health—to build optimism, inclusion and the best start in life.

Connecting to Place recognises the importance of being able to get around, live comfortably, eat well and enjoy the outdoors.

Connecting Knowledge and Know-How acknowledges the enormous community resource available in the Huon Valley to work with Council to increase health and wellness, reduce harm, provide learning and deliver collaboratively.

A number of 'Action Areas' support delivery of each Priority—a mix of 10 demographic, subject matter and process Areas, each with their own Aspiration and 'Directions' for change—the strategies that will deliver the health and wellbeing improvements and realise the Aspiration. A summary table of Priorities and Action Areas with the Aspirations is provided as an Appendix. The full *Huon Valley Health and Wellbeing Strategy* can be viewed at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MHKcNzydAVePVbTWSKWFOsBY9gWWDPKi/view>

One of the strengths of the *Huon Valley Health and Wellbeing Strategy—Working Towards Wellness for All People in the Huon Valley* is the approach to its implementation. An Annual Implementation Plan is developed by Council and partners under each Action Area, with the Direction, Key Tasks, Council Lead, Council Role, Partners and Timelines all clearly defined. The process of Council developing the Annual Implementation Plan transfers practical ownership from consultant to Council and its partners and increases accountability for the delivery of the Strategy. The agreed annual actions also form part of the Council's overall Annual Plan, further increasing transparency and accountability.

Defining moments

There were six 'defining moments' or key learnings for consideration in future development of health and wellbeing plans in rural communities.

Defining Moment #1—quality conversations matter

The more than 60 one-on-one conversations revealed the 'heartbeat' of the Huon Valley in a genuine and instructive way. The conversations brought the lived experience of residents to life and inspired a tailored framework for the Strategy.

Defining moment #2—the power of communities

Knowledge, wisdom and bright spots empower communities to build their own wellness when they are identified and mobilized. The Strategy's implementation approach recognises the power of community strengths and assets for building action.

Defining moment #3—brilliant ideas and insights

Brilliant individuals and creative organisations inspire different ways of thinking about issues and challenges and offer new ways of doing things. The Strategy features a listing of resources to ensure knowledge is effectively transferred from consultant to Council and community.

Defining moment #4—focus on wellness

Factors that support human health and wellbeing (salutogenesis) underpinned development of the Priorities, Action Areas and Directions. The Strategy and the Implementation Plan provide a platform and role for Council, community and other partners to build long-term wellness.

Defining moment #5—'how' is important

How things are done is just as important as *what* things are done. Community members expressed a desire for more involvement in local decision-making, while many of the brilliant ideas and insights offered by local, national and international thinkers and practitioners described a fresh way of doing things. The Strategy makes room for individuals and groups to be meaningfully involved in its delivery.

Defining moment #6—courageous council

The Council partnered in the development of the Strategy with an open heart and open mind, and in a spirit of trust. They listened to ideas and provided frank and considered responses. The Strategy supports Council to move towards an empowerment model of engagement with the community.

Appendix: Three priorities, 10 action areas

Priority—Connecting people

Action Areas	Our Aspirations
1 Inclusion and interaction	People of all ages have fulfilling and meaningful connections and a sense of belonging in their community
2 Conception to school	All Huon Valley children get the best start in life with the foundations for long-term health and wellness
3 Young healthy and well	Young people are resilient and optimistic, feel connected and valued, and can find the right support to meet their needs

Priority—Connecting to place

Action Areas	Our Aspirations
4 Getting Around	People move easily around, and out of, the Huon Valley to meet their health, social, educational, work and other needs
5 Affordable secure housing	People live in comfortable affordable innovative housing that promotes wellness
6 Fresh food for all	The best fresh food is available, affordable and accessible, people are skilled in growing, preparing and cooking it, and everyone eats well
7 Active outdoors	Our towns and hamlets are pedestrian-friendly, connected by a network of cycling tracks and walking trails, and have active recreation and exercise spaces that encourage participation and use

Priority—Connecting knowledge and know-how

Action Areas	Our Aspirations
8 Free from harm	Individuals, families and communities are safe from the harmful use of alcohol and other drugs
9 Learning for life	People in the Huon Valley at whatever stage of life or level of learning value, engage with, and participate in, lifelong learning
10 Strengthening connections	Local knowledge and know-how is connected to need and increases the wellness of individuals, families and communities

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Presenter

Fae Robinson is an engaging, versatile and analytical thinker and facilitator who partners with organisations to bring out their best. She is skilled at identifying, gathering and sifting through complex information to inform decision making. She presents information clearly and concisely in plain English. Fae is experienced in engaging with communities, groups and individuals and facilitates conversations that map the future and produce results. She recognises the wisdom in the conversations, challenges and extends thinking to reveal more, and brings rigour to constructing the way forward. Fae earned her consultancy stripes with Impact Solutions International, gaining skills in leadership and values development, and PDF Management Services, a broad-based management consultancy. This experience underpins her extensive expertise as an independent, versatile consultant. Fae spent 17 years in the public sector working in strategic development, policy, planning and performance, and marketing; and had an extensive private sector career as a journalist, commissioning editor, communications specialist and national marketing manager. Among her other qualifications, Fae has a Master of Science (Strategic Foresight, Swinburne) and uses her expert knowledge and experience to orient organisations towards their desired future.